



The Implications of Trade War on Multinational Companies: A Study Case Starbucks Expansion in China 2018-2020

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Abstract. This study aims to explain in detail the implications of the trade war on multinational companies with a case study of Starbucks expansion in China. The background behind the outbreak of the trade war itself stems from the United States accusing China of illegal practices stealing intellectual property and the United States' growing trade deficit. The trade war by the United States with the imposition of tariffs on several imported products, aims to protect domestic industries and increase employment. However, compared to the benefits, the trade war actually has a negative impact on US industry, both at home and abroad, especially for companies investing in China. Most of the industrial sectors affected are the manufacturing sector, while Starbucks is a multinational company in the food & beverage retail sector. Thus, this study will show that not all companies or industries will be affected by the trade war phenomenon, one of which is Starbucks.

Keywords: *Trade War, Multinational Corporation, MNC, United States, China, Starbucks.*

INTRODUCTION

The trade war was initiated by the President of the United States, Donald Trump, with the aim of protecting domestic industries and reducing the United States trade deficit. Reducing the deficit was one of Trump's strategies to create more jobs in United States. This deficit was caused by the consumption of imported consumer products, televisions, clothing, and other household goods, as well as automobiles and spare parts. A trade deficit can occur when exports are smaller than imports. In 2017, the United States exported approximately \$130 billion to China, with the largest categories being aircraft, soybeans, and automobiles (Amandeo, 2020). Meanwhile, U.S. imports from China amounted to \$505 billion, most of which consisted of electronics, clothing, and machinery (Amandeo, 2020).

China is the world's number one exporting country, with a comparative advantage that enables it to produce consumer goods at lower costs than other countries (Amandeo, 2020). China has a lower standard of living, which allows companies to pay lower wages, and U.S. companies cannot compete with these low costs, resulting in the loss of manufacturing jobs. Many Americans, of course, prefer lower-priced goods rather than paying more for "made in America" products (Amandeo, 2020).

The President of the United States, Donald Trump, viewed China as the main economic adversary of the United States. The U.S. President stated that China had engaged in theft and taken advantage of the United States. Therefore, Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy criticized China as a country that challenges U.S. power and influence and seeks to undermine the security and prosperity of the United States (Mildner & Schmucker, 2019).

The 2018 trade war between the two countries with the world's largest economies was initiated by the United States by imposing a 25% tariff on goods imported from China, which was then immediately retaliated against by the Bamboo Curtain country by also imposing additional tariffs on goods imported from the United States (Qiu, Zhan, & Wei, 2019).

At the beginning of 2018, Trump initiated three measures: global tariffs on steel, tariffs on European automobiles, and tariffs on Chinese imports (Amandeo, 2020). Following this announcement, global stock markets fell sharply due to fears of a trade war among the world's three largest economies; United States, Europe, and China.

The trade war between the two countries did not stop at the first round but continued into a second round, with no signs of ending by early 2020. The trade war became a phenomenal event and one of the largest in global markets over the past several centuries, thus having a significant negative impact on several international trade sectors and being said to potentially cause a global economic downturn if it were allowed to continue.

In August 2019, President Trump issued a warning to U.S. companies investing in China to immediately withdraw or pull out if they did not want to be affected by the trade war (Aipassa, 2019). The U.S. President even posted a tweet stating that the United States did not need China and would, in fact, be better off without China. As a result, many companies investing in China at that time panicked, worrying about the fate of their factories in China as well as their marketing operations. Companies that became easy targets included Apple, Nike, Starbucks, and KFC (Tamny, 2018). They panicked not only because of their marketing operations but also because China is the largest market, and the number of branch companies in the Bamboo Curtain country even exceeds those in their home country, the United States. Trump's warning was said to potentially hinder the expansion or investment of U.S.-based companies into China, especially retail companies such as Starbucks and KFC.

Many companies subsequently moved their production out of China to avoid Trump's tariff policies. Around 50 companies, including Apple, Nintendo, and Dell, shifted their manufacturing away from China (Li, 2019). Instead of relocating production back to their home countries, these companies moved to other countries that were not included in the tariff policy.

Observing that many companies left China or, more precisely, moved their production out of China, this did not occur with Starbucks. As one of the U.S.-based companies that had achieved considerable success in China since first expanding its market. In 2018, precisely when the trade war began, Starbucks managed to operate around 3,300 stores in 141 cities in China, employ approximately 45,000 employees, and open a new store every 15 hours (Starbucks, 2018). These data demonstrate that Starbucks experienced disciplined and profitable growth. In 2019, Starbucks even succeeded in opening 698 new stores in China (Ma, 2020).

The brief data on Starbucks' growth above then serve as the basis for the issues to be discussed in this study regarding why this multinational company was able to expand despite being in the midst of a trade war. This is considering that the tariff policies imposed had a significant impact on many U.S. companies operating in China, leading them to withdraw and relocate their operations out of China to avoid these tariffs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study places greater emphasis on the use of the MNC concept. Multinational corporations, or MNCs, are entities that have a tangible form and also have impacts on both their home country and the host country, which can also be referred to as the investment-receiving country (Cohen, 2007). However, in Stephen Cohen's book, it is stated that the definition of an MNC is not fixed and continually changes over time in line with the progression of globalization. This is evident in the current era, particularly in how trade wars can affect MNC

expansion. Therefore, in this study, the MNC concept will explain in detail the role of MNCs in politics as well as the attitudes and behaviors of MNCs in making investment decisions.

Over time, world civilization has undergone globalization, which for MNCs has had a considerably positive impact, especially in enabling continuous growth. Globalization makes it possible for MNCs to enter broader and new markets, access hundreds of millions of potential new customers, increase the number of international businesses across various countries, engage in cooperation, and become deeply involved with the economy of the host country, namely the country where the MNC operates (Detomasi, 2013). As globalization continues to develop, international actors are no longer limited to states alone; MNCs and non-governmental organizations have also become important actors. In this regard, many countries tend to fully entrust the market—believed to have “invisible hands” that regulate the national economy—namely countries that adopt an economic liberalization system.

Not only as economic actors, MNCs can also play roles as political actors by performing at least three important roles in the global political process. First, a direct role in Private Foreign Policy, in which companies can use economic means in direct bargaining with host-country governments to obtain favorable policies, either in the form of inducements such as promises of investment or threats such as expropriation or withdrawal (Nye Jr., 1974). Second, an unintentional direct role in Instruments of Influence. Regardless of their own political initiatives, the existence of companies whose decision-making domains cross national boundaries provides additional instruments that governments can use in their relations with one another, and companies can also engage in lobbying or manipulation as instruments for their home country (Nye Jr., 1974). Third, an indirect role in Setting the Agenda. In this case, MNCs play roles, either unintentionally or intentionally, in shaping the political agenda among states, lobbying for certain actions such as encouraging specific groups to pressure government policies (Nye Jr., 1974). In addition to these three important roles, MNCs then take advantage of political approaches by being selective in investment decision-making and bargaining (Detomasi, 2013).

Multinational corporations, or MNCs, essentially have different motives for participating in governance. First, complying with the preferences of stakeholders; second, having functional motivations in which MNCs perceive the need for greater regulation and choose to provide it because states cannot do so on their own; third, the desire to gain competitive advantages by helping to fill governance gaps, with the aim that high governance standards will also generate competitive benefits (Detomasi, 2013).

There are also challenges faced by MNCs in creating effective governance mechanisms, which are said to pose risks at several points. First, such efforts will be widely regarded as legitimate only if supported by both the home government and the host government, as well as stakeholders (Detomasi, 2013). Second, these governance efforts must be effective in enhancing regulation and the macroeconomic, social, and institutional structures of the countries in which they invest (Detomasi, 2013). Third, such governance mechanisms must be able to withstand continuous changes over time (Detomasi, 2013).

It has been explained that MNCs are international actors capable of playing political roles. In performing these roles, MNCs make selectively considered decisions regarding their investments. In this context, there are certain characteristics and behaviors of MNCs that depend on investment objectives and the type of company.

The characteristics and behavior of MNCs in Stephen Cohen's book are explained primarily in terms of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), which is a tool used by MNCs in the form of foreign capital to establish companies in other countries. There are many identifications and classifications of various forms of FDI; however, to relate to the issues in this study, the discussion will focus only on the objectives or motivations of a company in establishing

subsidiaries in foreign countries. This explanation thus leads to an understanding of the behavior and characteristics of MNCs.

The objectives and motivations of MNCs in making investments consist of four factors. These differ based on the nature of each company, and these factors tend to reflect the characteristics of MNCs and produce different effects. First, FDI with the objective of seeking resources. Companies with this objective are usually from the primary sector, seeking natural resources such as extracting minerals, metals, oil, gold, copper, and other natural resources, while considering climate conditions, the quality of transportation infrastructure, accessibility of raw materials, and the extent to which political officials accommodate foreign companies by providing good governance, favorable taxation, and regulatory policies as well as legal frameworks (Cohen, 2007). Second, FDI with the objective of seeking markets. Companies with this objective usually aim to expand their markets by having physical production facilities rather than exporting from thousands of miles away, typically companies in the manufacturing sector (Cohen, 2007). Third, FDI with the objective of seeking efficiency. Closely related to the previous objective, many companies investing abroad aim to reduce production costs by seeking labor-intensive countries with low wages (Cohen, 2007). Fourth, FDI with the objective of seeking strategic assets. This objective is pursued by companies not to reduce costs or protect markets, but to acquire assets designed to strengthen the competitive position of the acquiring company or weaken competitors (Cohen, 2007).

Based on the detailed explanations of the concepts above, these will be used as the foundation to address the issues in this study. The political role of MNCs as international actors, taking into account their behavior and characteristics, serves as the basis for explaining why the MNC Starbucks was able to survive in China amid the trade war between the United States and China.

METHODS

Type of Research

The research conducted is qualitative or explanatory in nature. The author provides an explanatory description of the issues to be discussed.

Type of Data

The type of data used in this study is secondary data, obtained through literature review sourced from books, journals, articles, newspapers, and other supporting online sources related to the issues discussed.

Analysis Technique

Explaining the problems clearly, orderly, and systematically by using concepts, theories, and perspectives from experts as analytical sources. Meanwhile, the case functions as an application of the theories, concepts, and perspectives obtained from the collected data.

RESULTS

The industry or companies that were most exposed to the impacts of the trade war were in the manufacturing sector. Meanwhile, companies such as KFC, McDonald's, and Starbucks, which operate in the F&B retail sector, did not show signs of being affected by the trade war. Therefore, this study will further discuss the strong reasons why Starbucks was able to survive in China based on the conceptual framework.

Although there were considerable concerns regarding an economic slowdown in China, Starbucks remained firmly optimistic about its second-largest market. At the beginning of 2019, Starbucks was even predicted to be the next company to be warned about weakening sales in

China (Lucas, 2019). However, Starbucks instead proved that the coffee company was able to handle changing consumers and different economic conditions.

In 2019, specifically several months after the trade war between the United States and China began, the number of Starbucks locations in China increased by 18% to 3,700 stores in the first quarter of 2019 and operated in 158 cities (Lucas, 2019). Then, on April 25, 2019, the company announced revenues in line with consensus at \$6.3 billion, up 4.5% year over year (Team, 2019). Furthermore, it was noted that total net revenue for the world's largest coffee chain rose 7% to \$6.75 billion, which was higher than the average analyst estimate of \$6.68 billion (Russ & Kumar, 2019). Meanwhile, for 2020, Starbucks projected same-store sales growth to increase from 3% to 4%, while many analysts estimated growth at 3.3% (Russ & Kumar, 2019).

Not only that, in March 2020, Starbucks announced plans to invest \$130 million in a production facility in China called the Coffee Innovation Park (Brown, 2020). This facility would become Starbucks' first large-scale production roasting facility in what is the company's second-largest and fastest-growing retail market, namely China. By 2022, the company planned to have 6,000 stores, with the facility including a roasting plant, warehouse, and distribution center (Brown, 2020).

The presentation of year-on-year growth data for Starbucks amid the trade war between the United States and China raises a major question as to why this could occur. Unlike Apple and other manufacturing companies, Starbucks was not affected by the tariff war between the two countries with the largest economies. In simple terms, Starbucks and Apple operate in different sectors. Apple is a manufacturing company that engages in export–import activities, whereas Starbucks is an F&B retail company that does not conduct export–import activities for either its raw materials or even its finished products.

In a 2019 interview with Bloomberg, Kevin Johnson, the CEO of Starbucks, stated “build Starbucks in China for China,” emphasizing that the company has a complete range of beverages and food, as well as R&D teams, digital teams, design teams, and a supply chain based in China (Television, 2018) . As a result, Starbucks is able to operate as an entity in China that is relevant to Chinese consumers and that respects Chinese culture (Gurdus, 2018). David Westin of Bloomberg then questioned how trade tensions between the United States and China affected Starbucks' expansion or growth in China.

Starbucks is a company with 80 markets spread across the world, and in its expansion the company always encounters the geopolitical conditions of each country. However, Johnson emphasized that there was no material impact from the trade war on Starbucks. In China itself, Starbucks works with 55,000 partners who proudly wear the company's signature green apron and employs artisans and workers directly from China. Johnson further added that by maintaining optimism and developing the right strategies for collaboration to create a better environment, Starbucks would be able to endure in China over the long term (Gurdus, 2018).

As an MNC acting as an international actor, Starbucks carries out one of its important direct roles in global politics, namely Private Foreign Policy. Through its strongest strategy, Starbucks partners with the Chinese government. This is marked by the opening of the Starbucks Shanghai Roastery and Tasting Room, covering an area of 30,000 square meters in a commercial mall, with full support from the Mayor of Jing'an District, Shanghai, Lu Xiaodong (Butch, 2016). This evidence clearly shows that Starbucks is able to perform a political role by engaging in bargaining with the host-country government—China—using an economic approach that promises investment. This is certainly influential, considering that after opening its economy internationally, China became the largest recipient of FDI among developing countries (Davies, 2013). China also has an interest in attracting as many investors as possible to promote international trade and increase foreign exchange earnings.

Starbucks' investment agreement with the Chinese government was further strengthened through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Yunnan Academy of Agricultural Sciences and the Yunnan Provincial Government (Food Ingredients First, 2020). The Yunnan government aims to promote responsible and high-quality coffee cultivation. In line with this objective, Starbucks also has corporate interests, which led to the signing of an agreement with the Yunnan government involving investment in and operation of its first coffee base plantation, a coffee development center, a coffee farmer support center, and coffee processing facilities in Pu'er (Food Ingredients First, 2020). These initiatives subsequently complement Starbucks' entire value chain in China and deepen its presence in the country. As a result, the provincial government planned an investment of \$450 million and aimed to increase coffee plantation areas from the current 26,700 hectares to 100,000 hectares by 2020 (Food Ingredients First, 2020).

In addition to its role in Private Foreign Policy, Starbucks also plays an indirect role as an instrument of the state, both for its home country and the host country. This is evidenced by Chinese President Xi Jinping requesting assistance from former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, through a letter, to help improve United States–China relations, which had reached their lowest point in recent decades due to tariff war tensions (McDonald, 2021). The letter can be seen as reflecting an initiative that asked American business leaders to help influence policy following the election of a new U.S. President, Joe Biden (McDonald, 2021). Economists and political analysts stated that there was a possibility that Biden would attempt to revive cooperation with Beijing.

In carrying out its role, the MNC Starbucks certainly possesses specific characteristics and traits. Based on the MNC concept explaining corporate characteristics, it is identified that Starbucks is a multinational company with market-seeking and efficiency-seeking objectives. China has become a market destination for many companies, including Starbucks, because it offers promising market potential due to its population, which accounts for around one-fifth of the world's population. It is evidenced that in 2019 China's population reached 1.41 billion, making it the most populous country in the world, and the United Nations predicted it would reach 1.44 billion by 2029 (BBC, 2019). These data serve as proof that China is the most densely populated country in the world, resulting in a labor supply that exceeds demand, which keeps wages low. Another fact is that until the end of the 20th century, the majority of Chinese people were rural and from lower-middle classes; thus, internal rural-to-urban migration made migrants willing to work multiple shifts for low wages (Bajpai, 2021). Official statistics state that internal migrants in China account for around 10% of the total population (Scheineson, 2009). Furthermore, in January 2020 there was an increase in minimum wages in China, with the minimum wage in Shanghai recorded at 22 yuan or equivalent to \$3.16 per hour, and in Shenzhen at 20.3 yuan or equivalent to \$2.91 per hour (Bajpai, 2021). This is compared to wages of workers in the United States, which exceed \$7 per hour (Puhak, 2020). Such efficiency is one of the reasons why the MNC Starbucks has continued to survive in China amid the tariff war, as it strongly believes in the Chinese market and the profit targets to be gained in the future.

Looking at the characteristics of MNCs as resource-seeking companies, it can be said that Starbucks falls into this category. Still related to the political role of MNCs, Starbucks signed an agreement with the local government of Yunnan, a rural area in southern China, to establish the first coffee bean plantation in Asia to serve the rapidly growing population of coffee drinkers in China (Burkitt, 2010). The agreement was made to achieve policies that benefit both parties. Starbucks offered investment while also employing and training local farmers to produce high-quality coffee beans. In 2012, Starbucks also opened a support center for Yunnan farmers, with the simple aim of helping farmers improve the quality of coffee beans while establishing C.A.F.E. (Coffee and Farmer Equity) practices, which help ensure socially and environmentally

responsible coffee production. It was also stated that this Yunnan farmer support center marked a milestone in Starbucks' sustainable investment in the Chinese market (China Sourcing News, 2012). The history of coffee in this region is relatively young; it was first introduced by French missionaries in the 1880s and only began to be widely produced in 1988 (Reserve, 2021).

DISCUSSION

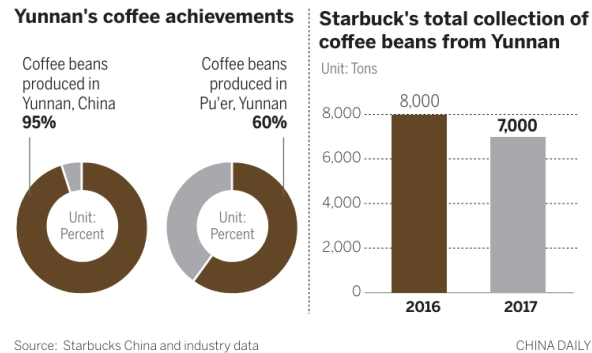


Figure 1. Starbucks Coffee Beans from Yunnan Province

Then, data show that the city of Pu'er in Yunnan Province contributes around 60% of coffee beans, while Yunnan as a whole accounts for 95% of China's total coffee production (Zhouqiong, 2018). In 2017, Starbucks sourced around 7,000 tons of high-quality coffee beans from Yunnan and developed a small-lot coffee from the region called Reserve Yunnan Yellow Honey Coffee (Zhouqiong, 2018). Not only that, as previously presented regarding Starbucks' investment plan for the Coffee Innovation Park, this investment is said to be Starbucks' largest manufacturing investment outside the United States and its first in Asia. The CIP will integrate a roasting plant, warehouse, and distribution center, and create highly skilled jobs as well as new career opportunities to drive a smart and sustainable coffee plant in China (Brightmore, 2020).

Although the trade war affected the global economy and many industries, not all traded commodities were impacted by the effects of the trade war, one of which was retail companies such as Starbucks. By also playing an important role as an instrument of the state, the MNC Starbucks was able to persuade the local Chinese government and sign joint agreements to create favorable policies. In Q3 2018, Starbucks experienced a 2% decline in sales; however, in Q4 2018 and Q1 2019, sales increased again (Lucas, 2019). Starbucks considered the possibility of long-term gains in China and disregarded the small short-term losses incurred. Moreover, the construction of the Starbucks Coffee Innovation Park, which will source coffee directly from China for processing, roasting, packaging, and distribution (Starbucks, 2020). Further indicates that Starbucks' expansion in China has continued to broaden and grow rapidly despite the trade war between China and the United States.

CONCLUSION

The trade war initiated by the President of the United States, Donald Trump, became a major topic of international attention. The U.S. President's reason for imposing tariffs was his accusation against China of illegal practices and theft of U.S. intellectual property, as well as data showing that the United States experienced a trade deficit after 2001, specifically following the bilateral cooperation agreement between the United States and China. Therefore, Trump imposed tariffs on many Chinese products entering the United States.

Naturally, a trade war is not carried out by only one party; the other party that feels disadvantaged retaliates by imposing similar tariffs. Based on the data that have been analyzed,

the losses from the trade war do not only affect the two countries involved bilaterally, but also have multilateral impacts. Countries such as the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were also affected by the trade war and retaliated against Trump's tariff impositions.

The impact of the trade war was strongly felt by industries or companies, especially in the manufacturing sector. Manufacturing industries in the United States suffered significantly due to increased costs of importing goods from China to support their final production processes. Moreover, China's imposition of tariffs on imports from the United States further exacerbated their difficulties due to the high costs of marketing goods in international markets. Thus, it is clear that in the long term, the trade war will generate negative effects and lead to a global economic downturn. Not only domestic U.S. companies, but also companies investing in China experienced losses and received warnings from Trump to immediately withdraw from China if they did not want to be affected by the tariffs. Companies such as Apple, Dell, HP, Nintendo, and Skechers eventually decided to move their production out of China. Even a Chinese company itself, TCL, also relocated its production out of China. However, these companies did not move their production to the United States, as Trump had hoped; instead, they chose Southeast Asian countries due to relatively lower production costs and labor wages.

Multinational companies that were most affected were those in the manufacturing sector. For F&B retail companies such as Starbucks, there were no indications of significant impact from the trade war between the home country and the host country, namely the United States and China. Starbucks' CEO, Kevin Johnson, stated that there was no material impact from the trade war on Starbucks. Starbucks is built in China and for China, and as much as possible the company builds and operates its business while respecting Chinese culture—roasting and producing its own coffee beans, and employing employees and designers directly from China.

Starbucks has also survived because it was able to carry out its role as an international actor in Private Foreign Policy with the Chinese government and indirectly as an instrument in bilateral relations between the United States and China. In addition, not all traded commodities are affected by the trade war in a way that requires industries or companies to relocate their production out of China, as is the case with manufacturing companies. In the case of Starbucks, which is an F&B retail company, it was not affected because the company does not engage in export and import processes. Therefore, the imposition of tariffs in the trade war does not affect the company's expansion in China.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, this research employs a qualitative and explanatory approach relying solely on secondary data sources such as books, academic journals, news articles, reports, and online publications. As a result, the analysis depends heavily on the availability, accuracy, and interpretation of existing sources. The absence of primary data, such as interviews with Starbucks executives, policymakers, or industry experts, limits the depth of insight into internal corporate decision-making processes and state–corporate negotiations.

Second, this research focuses exclusively on Starbucks as a single case study to explain the role and behavior of multinational corporations (MNCs) amid the U.S.–China trade war. While this case provides a detailed and relevant illustration of how an F&B retail MNC can survive and expand during trade tensions, the findings cannot be fully generalized to all MNCs, particularly those operating in different sectors such as manufacturing, technology, or heavy industry, which are more directly affected by tariff policies. Third, the scope of the study is limited to the period surrounding the U.S.–China trade war from 2018 to early 2020. Consequently, longer-term impacts of the trade war, post-2020 developments, and the influence of other major global events—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—are not examined in depth. This temporal limitation may affect the assessment of Starbucks' long-term sustainability

strategy in China. Fourth, the analysis is framed primarily through the concept of MNCs, particularly focusing on Private Foreign Policy, market-seeking, efficiency-seeking, and resource-seeking behaviors. Other theoretical perspectives, such as consumer behavior theory, cultural branding, or global value chain restructuring, are not extensively explored. This theoretical focus narrows the analytical lens and may overlook alternative explanations for Starbucks' resilience in China.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a focused and coherent analysis of Starbucks as a multinational corporation acting as an international actor during a period of heightened trade tensions. The acknowledged limitations are intended to clarify the scope of the research and to provide direction for future studies that may incorporate comparative cases, primary data collection, broader theoretical frameworks, or extended timeframes.

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