

~~made in China~~

made-for-China



benelux 荷比卢商会
chamber of commerce in china

From "Made in China" to "Made for China"

For many Western companies, the story of China began on the factory floor. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, China emerged as the world's manufacturing powerhouse, offering scale, efficiency, and access to global supply chains. For businesses across Europe and North America, the country's primary appeal was clear: it was an ideal place to produce goods for export.

Today, however, a different story is unfolding.

China remains a manufacturing giant, but it has also become one of the world's most dynamic consumer markets. Increasingly, foreign companies are discovering that long-term success in China is no longer defined solely by what they can make there, but by what they can sell there. This shift from "Made in China" to "Made for China" represents one of the most significant developments in international business over the past two decades.

At the heart of this transformation is China's growing middle class. Rising incomes, urbanization, and changing consumer preferences have created a market of remarkable scale and sophistication. Chinese consumers are not simply purchasing more products; they are demanding higher quality, greater personalization, and stronger brand experiences. For Western companies, this has opened opportunities that extend far beyond manufacturing.

The change has also required a change in mindset.

In the past, many foreign firms approached China primarily as an operational hub. Product development, branding, and strategic decisions

were often made at headquarters in Europe or North America, while Chinese operations focused on production and distribution. Today, successful companies increasingly recognize that Chinese consumers have distinct preferences and expectations. Winning in the market requires local understanding, local talent, and local innovation.

This is also true for companies from the Benelux region.

Dutch dairy cooperative FrieslandCampina has spent years building its presence in China, not simply as an exporter but as a company deeply engaged with local consumer needs. Rather than treating China as just another destination for European products, the company invested in understanding Chinese demand for high-quality dairy nutrition, particularly in areas such as infant and family nutrition. We are proud to call them our member.

This approach reflects a broader trend among successful foreign businesses. Rather than assuming that products developed for European consumers will automatically succeed elsewhere, companies are increasingly adapting offerings to local preferences and market conditions. The emphasis shifts from selling products in China to creating products for China.

Perhaps even more importantly, the relationship has become a two-way exchange of ideas.

For many years, innovation flowed from West to East. Today, companies operating in China frequently find themselves learning from one of the world's most competitive and fast-moving business environments. Chinese consumers are highly digital, e-commerce adoption is widespread, and companies are often expected to respond quickly to changing trends.

As a result, multinational firms are increasingly using China not only as a sales market but also as a source of innovation. Insights gathered from Chinese customers can influence product development, marketing strategies, and digital engagement efforts across global operations.

The experience of foreign companies in China also highlights the value of localization. Localization does not simply mean translating packaging or marketing materials. It involves empowering local teams, building relationships with partners, understanding consumer behaviour, and adapting business models to local realities.

Companies that embrace this approach often discover opportunities that would otherwise remain invisible. A market as large and diverse as China cannot be understood through assumptions alone. Success depends on adaptation, flexibility, and the ability to find the right local partners.

For businesses in the Benelux and across Europe, this evolution offers an important lesson. China is no longer only a place where products are manufactured efficiently and shipped abroad. It is a gigantic market that increasingly shapes global consumer trends and business practices.

From "Made in China" to "Made for China".

Of course, operating in China requires careful planning, market knowledge, and an understanding of regulatory requirements. Yet the broader story remains one of opportunity. Many foreign companies have found that engagement with China has encouraged them to become more innovative, more customer-focused, and more globally minded.

As global markets continue to evolve, the most successful businesses are those that view China not simply as a manufacturing centre, but as a partner in growth, learning, and innovation. For many Western companies,

that realization is already shaping the next chapter of their international journey.

If you are interested in learning more about doing business in China and in the Benelux, finding the right partners, and all other ways the Benelux Chamber of Commerce in China can support your business, do not hesitate to reach out to us.