

The Great Divide: An Examination of Recent Disparities in U.S.-China Auto Parts Trade

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After a long period of relative parity between reported trade statistics of U.S. automotive part (auto parts) trade with China, a notable discrepancy has emerged.¹ In theory, concordant import and export data should align, as they are two sides of the same trade flow. However, since 2020, Chinese-reported export data has been significantly higher than the concordant U.S.-reported import data. Additionally, the discrepancy coincides with the introduction of Section 301 tariffs on certain Chinese products. This executive briefing on trade will explore the extent of the disparity between reported auto parts trade and assess whether the disparity is unique to the U.S.-China auto parts trade relationship.

While differences in bilateral import and export reporting are a normal phenomenon, a trend that seemingly differs from the status quo has emerged when comparing reported U.S.-China auto parts trade.

Figure 1 Difference between Chinese-reported exports to the U.S. and U.S.-reported imports from China, 2010–25



Source: S&P Global, GTAS/China Customs & U.S. Census, and author calculations.

Analysis of global bilateral trade shows a growing global trend of large bilateral trade discrepancies suggesting a simple disparity between reported imports and concordant exports is not uncommon.² A clear and unique change, however, occurs for U.S.-China auto parts trade beginning around 2020. Prior to 2020, there was a relatively small difference in Chinese-reported auto parts exports to the United States and U.S.-reported imports. On average between January 2010 and December 2019, Chinese-reported auto part exports to the United States were \$10.9 million (1 percent) less than the corresponding U.S. import statistics (figure 1).³ Following this period of relative parity between the two reported statistics, bilateral trade reporting began to diverge significantly, with Chinese-

reported auto parts exports to the United States consistently higher than the corresponding reported U.S. imports. On average between January 2020 and September 2025, Chinese-reported auto part exports were \$236.9 million (19 percent) greater than the corresponding U.S. auto part imports.

The post-2020 disparity is somewhat consistent with the trend exhibited by the overall trade statistics between the two countries. While the increased disparity between reported auto parts trade statistics mirrors a similar increase in overall trade statistic disparity, the auto part disparity is larger as a share of trade. Between January 2010 and December 2019, total Chinese-reported export statistics were \$5.7 billion (15 percent) less than the corresponding U.S. import statistics, while between January 2020 and September 2025, Chinese-reported exports were \$5.1 billion (14 percent) greater.

¹ For the purposes of this analysis, auto parts are defined as products classified under Harmonized System (HS) subheadings 4011.10, 4011.20, 4012.11, 4012.12, 4012.19, 4013.10, 4016.93, 7007.11, 7007.21, 7009.10, 7320.10, 8301.20, 8302.30, 8407.34, 8408.20, 8409.91, 8409.99, 8414.30, 8415.20, 8425.49, 8426.91, 8511.10, 8511.20, 8511.30, 8511.40, 8511.50, 8511.80, 8511.90, 8512.20, 8512.30, 8512.40, 8512.90, 8527.21, 8527.29, 8539.10, 8539.21, 8539.21, 8544.30, 8707.10, 8707.90, 8708.10, 8708.21, 8708.22, 8708.29, 8708.30, 8708.40, 8708.50, 8708.70, 8708.80, 8708.91, 8708.92, 8708.93, 8708.94, 8708.95, 8708.99, 8716.90, 9029.10, 9029.20, 9029.90, 9104.00, 9401.20, 9401.90, and 9401.99.

² For this analysis, the author considers any trade statistic difference larger than 25 percent to be a large discrepancy.

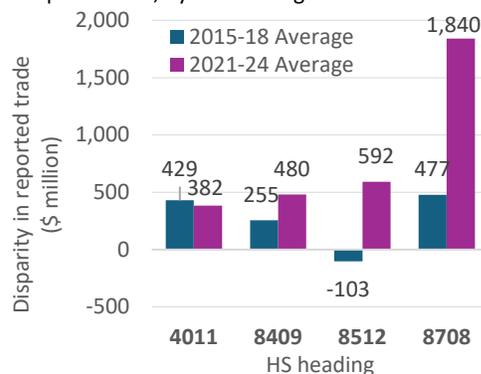
³ For this analysis, the discrepancy is calculated as the difference between Chinese-reported export value and the importer-reported import value. Percents represent the discrepancy divided by reported import value.

The disparity in bilateral trade reporting is not uniform across all categories of auto parts. Four HS headings show particularly high disparities, compared with other parts-related HS headings: certain chassis, drivetrain, and body parts (HS 8708), lighting, signaling, and windshield related electrical equipment (HS 8512), engine parts (HS 8409), and rubber pneumatic tires (HS 4011) (figure 2). These four HS headings also happen to be among the five largest parts-related HS headings from China by import value, which is interesting as the literature shows discrepancies tend to rise as the slice of trade you are looking at gets narrower. Apart from pneumatic tires, which have shown a consistent difference, all of these parts categories have seen an increase in trade statistic disparity.

The magnitude of divergence in auto part trade statistics appears to be a phenomenon unique to the U.S.-China trade relationship. While differences existed between the auto parts trade statistics of China and its other trading partners, they were generally much smaller. In 2024, Chinese-reported auto parts exports were on average 5 percent greater than concordant imports of its trading partners compared to 23 percent greater than concordant U.S. imports. The U.S.-China disparity is the largest of China's top five auto parts trading partners, followed by Mexico (where Chinese exports 16 percent lower than concordant imports) and Germany (8 percent higher). Furthermore, apparent disparities in reported trade between China and non-U.S. countries do not exhibit the same dramatic increase seen post-2020. Additionally, this does not appear to be entirely a China phenomenon. Across all U.S. auto import sources, on average reported exports were 5 percent higher than concordant imports. Chinese exports, however, had the largest disparity among the top 5 U.S. auto parts sources.

A few things could explain the disparity in auto parts trade statistics and offer potential areas of future research. One reason for misalignment in concordant import and export data is a difference in product classification. Bustos et al. (2025) highlight discrepancies at the product level can become more pronounced due to classification differences, especially as they are frequently updated. Thus, a change may have been made in how parts are classified in either of the countries.⁴ Grigoriou et al. (2019) find a strong correlation between tariff peaks and complexity and discrepancies in trade statistics. Given this correlation, the increase in disparity is somewhat expected in light of the increased complexity coinciding with the introduction of Section 301 tariffs, though understanding the underlying cause remains valuable. Alternatively, the disparity could be related to transshipment.⁵ While transshipment can be a common aspect of global trade, it is considered illegal if used to obscure country of origin as outlined by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Reporting from *Newsweek* and *TIME* indicate transshipment may be employed as means to avoid the tariffs certain Chinese-originating products face entering the U.S. market.

Figure 2 Largest differences in reported U.S.-China auto parts trade, by HS Heading



Source: S&P Global, GTAS/China Customs & U.S. Census, and author calculations.

Sources: S&P Global, [GTAS](#), Imports & export, auto parts, accessed 1/13/26; Bustos, S. et al., "[Tackling Discrepancies in Trade Data](#)," 7/24/25; WCO, "[Amending the HS](#)," accessed 2/5/26; Grigoriou, C. et. al., "[How Helpful are Mirror Statistic for Customs Reform?](#)," 9/19; ST & R, "[What is Transshipment?](#)," 7/31/25; U.S. CBP, "[CTPAT Alert—Illegal Transshipment](#)," 12/18/25; Newsweek/McCartney, M., "[How China Is Dodging US Tariffs](#)," 5/5/25; TIME/Jeyaretnam, M., "[Why the U.S.-Vietnam 'Transshipment' Clause Complicates Trade Tensions with China](#)," 7/4/25.

⁴ After the WCO adopts changes to the HS, it typically takes countries two and a half years to implement the change and adjust their customs tariff schedules and statistical systems; however, some countries may take longer.

⁵ Transshipment is the process by which goods are routed through an intermediary country and transported from one mode of transportation to another, including from ship to ship, enroute to their final destinations. During the transfer, transshipped cargo is to remain under customs authority control and does not undergo any other operations beyond what is needed to preserve its condition.