



# THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

July 20, 2021

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## Eileen Cai, VP, Economic Development, Asia & North America, Charlotte Regional Business Alliance

by Elly Clary  
(Could this be you next week?)

Big numbers and impressive financial figures flowed freely in a presentation from the point person for direct Asian business investment in the Charlotte area.

"I think you will all be surprised to see how much international business has grown in this market," said Eileen Cai. As a vice president for economic development, she concentrates on recruiting from Asia and North America for the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance.

There are more than 1,000 businesses based in more than 40 countries operating in the Charlotte region, Cai said. Those companies have made about \$1.9 billion in investments here since 2017. They employ in excess of 80,000 people, with 53,000, or 36 percent, working in manufacturing.

Germany and the United Kingdom are the top two countries represented by companies in this region. Recognizable names include Siemens Energy and Compass Group.

But also here are 88 firms from Japan and 49 from China, together employing nearly 11,500 workers. Other Asian companies operating here are from countries such as India and Singapore. Nipon Electric Glass from Japan and GITI Tire Group from Singapore stand out. MLILY USA from China recently

announced expansion plans here.

Cai joined the Alliance in 2007 and has brought the Charlotte area 80 projects from international firms, creating in excess of 9,000 jobs. That represents a total investment of \$878 million.

Impressive infrastructure in the Charlotte region is a big selling point, she said. She cited Charlotte Douglas International Airport and proximity to international ports such as Wilmington and Charleston. Also attractive are intermodal facilities that enable efficient shipment to international and domestic markets. More than 70 percent of the U.S. population is accessible by truck in two days or less.

An enviable talent pool is alluring, Cai said. Apprenticeship programs at community colleges such as Central Piedmont as well as at universities are geared toward developing technical skills for potential workers.

Cai admitted to navigating around obstacles. "Charlotte is not a well-enough-known city internationally," she said. "We really have to sell very hard. We're not a first-tier city yet." That stands out in a lack of direct flights to major points in Asia.

Sheer distance is a hindrance sometimes, she said. "There is 12 hours difference" for many Asian companies.

"The biggest challenge probably is culture differences," she added. Besides language, "how it's done here is a learning process for Asian companies. How to operate right, how to follow the rules, those are the things they have to overcome."

Mitigating that somewhat, she said, is a diverse and growing international business community. The region's foreign-born population is more than 250,000.

A major recruiting plus is the availability of regional operating sites. "There is great opportunity in the region outside Mecklenburg County. There is still a lot of development opportunity especially for industrial," she said, and specifically mentioned Chester and Lincoln counties.

The Charlotte region's various resources combined with an affordable quality of life, Cai said, make it an attractive business destination overall.

\*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/577333362>  
Ms. Cai's introduction begins at the 8:02 mark.