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# France-China relations or the pre-Olympic psychodrama in perspective

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The Olympic Games were the occasion of a real psychodrama between the French and Chinese governments. President Nicolas Sarkozy remained silent for a long time about the repression of the riots in Tibet before announcing, under the pressure of public opinion, that he did not envisage taking part in the opening ceremony. At the worst moment of the crisis, after the tumultuous passage of the flame in Paris, Beijing violently protested and internet activists organized a boycott of the Carrefour supermarkets, which are well established in China.

Nicolas Sarkozy gave the image of a president who was muddled, boastful and inconsistent. Chinese firmness paid off: Beijing obtained all that it wanted. High level French delegations went to China to make amends. Sarkozy gave up the idea of meeting the Dalai Lama at the time of his passage in France in August (after having declared in front of the European Parliament that he would not yield to the threats of the Chinese embassy!) and he took part without conditions in the opening ceremony of the Games.

**Economic relations.** The Franco-Chinese pre-Olympic psychodrama was much more acute than what happened with other countries. It revealed France's weak position on the economic level. France carries less weight in China than Germany and its machine tools do, as French businessmen did not fail to remind the Elysée. There are more than 600 French companies and nearly 1400 establishments in China, as well as many cooperation programmes. The "big contracts" concern aviation, with the Franco-German Airbus and Eurocopter, and Alcatel in the space field, high-speed trains (Alstom), and nuclear energy (Areva, Alstom and EDF). Among other important investments, let us note the car industry (Citroen, Michelin...), the environment (Veolia), construction (Lafarge) and large-scale retail distribution (Carrefour).

China is the fifth supplier of France: its market share (6.3 per cent overall) represents 28 per cent in clothing and 20 per cent in electronics. It represents its biggest bilateral deficit (ahead of Germany), with nearly 20 billion euros. France exports to China in the fields of transport (spare car parts, aeronautics, railway material), spirits and bottled water, cosmetics and luxury leather goods and pharmacy. But China imports three times more from Germany than from France. The tourist industry occupies an increasingly important place, with more than 600,000 Chinese visiting France each year in the framework of European tours - they stay for only a short time but spend a lot shopping.

**Long-standing political relations.** The pre-Olympic psychodrama confirmed the importance in Beijing's eyes of the long-standing political relations with Paris. The Chinese leaders perceived Sarkozy's boasting as a questioning of privileged links which go back to de Gaulle - and they reacted in consequence.

It was indeed under the presidency of General de Gaulle that, on January 27, 1964, the French state recognized the People's Republic of China. Other Western countries, such as Great Britain had, unlike France, maintained after 1949 minimum diplomatic relations with Beijing. But this time, Paris

having broken with Taipei, relations were established on an ambassadorial level, eight years before the entry of the People's Republic into the United Nations.

The ambition was at that time geopolitical rather than economic. France and China were the last two countries - against the American-Soviet projects - to have forced their way into the then very closed club of nuclear powers. At the time of the confrontation between the Eastern and Western "blocs", each of them affirmed its autonomy within its own "camp": two years later, while remaining in the Atlantic Alliance, Paris left the integrated military command of NATO, imposing the closing of US bases on its territory - and Beijing was preparing the Sino-Soviet conflict.

The French Right remained of course virulently anti-communist, but with a strong Sinophile lobby. The geopolitical relationship between Paris and Beijing was reaffirmed in 1997 with the establishment of a "global partnership" and, very recently, with the signature of a "joint statement" at the time of the visit of Jacques Chirac in October 2004. It is this Gaullist continuity which Nicolas Sarkozy seemed to be calling into question at the time of the pre-Olympic crisis of 2008.

**A tradition of solidarity.** France is perhaps also one of the countries where, in the 1960s and 70s, interest in China was most widespread in the new far left, well beyond just the Maoist currents (who were only rather briefly influential). Thus, a "Trotsky-Guevarist" movement like the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR - which has now become the Revolutionary Communist League) had as its watchword, "the Chinese revolution is too serious a question to be left to the Maoists!". Many activists of this period studied the history of revolutions and counter-revolutions in China and could later be found in various international associations of solidarity and in defence of human rights.

This involvement encouraged active support for the Chinese democratic movement at the time of the "Beijing Spring" (1978-1979) when Wei Jingsheng launched the slogan of the "Fifth modernization" (democracy). A decade later, the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 made a very deep impact in France. That was when the sinologist Marie Holzman founded the association "China Solidarity" which still works today to defend "dissidents", in particular exiles.

**Migrants.** One of the most important developments of the last decade has been the participation of Chinese migrants in the struggle of the sans-papiers [undocumented workers] collectives, for the regularization of their situation and the recognition of their rights. Beginning in August 1996 with the creation of the "third collective" of sans-papiers, then the "2000 collective", the public intervention of Chinese workers alongside non-Chinese was a new fact. Prepared by general meetings and giving rise to several movements, the mobilization took militant forms, such as the occupation of the Saint-Hippolyte church in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris and of a retention centre for foreigners in the 3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissement. Hundreds of families demanded their regularization, breaking with the discretion and the traditional autarky of their diaspora, which benefits from its own powerful financial networks and traders (and often from the support of the Chinese embassy) and from a community lending system (the "hui") and solidarity "tontines". The struggle of clandestine Chinese migrants made it possible for approximately 7,500 of them to obtain papers, out of 9,000 applications.

France has experienced successive waves of Chinese immigration. The oldest goes back to the First World War, with the bringing in of 140,000 Chinese migrants to replace the workers sent to the front. At the beginning of the 1920s, in particular within the framework of the Work-Study movement, nationalist activists went to France, where they became communists, some of them later becoming, back in their own country, leaders of the Chinese Communist Party: Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai...

Rather than speaking of one Chinese community in France, it is probably better today to use the

plural, to speak of communities: those who come from Wenzhou, Teochew, Dongbei.... The migrants in fact come mainly from particular areas and speak different dialects. They are above all country people, often having experience of the small-scale industry of the south-eastern coastal provinces, in particular Zhejiang, as well as Chinese (often merchants) who had been living in Indo-China: Cantonese from Vietnam and Chaozhou from Cambodia. But the recent drastic reorganizations of large-scale industry have led to the emigration of workers, supervisory staff and technicians from the provinces of the North-East. From the end of the 1970s, Chinese quarters came into existence, becoming veritable "Chinatowns", in particular in Paris, in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement and in Belleville.

The origin of the immigrants is becoming diversified and there are probably some 450,000 Chinese in France today, of whom 250,000 are in the Paris region. They work to a large extent in clandestine Chinese or Turkish workshops, and in the Jewish district of Sentier - in the clothing and leather industries -, in restaurants and shops, in the building industry and as cleaning ladies.

In 2003, the International Labour Organization began research on the contemporary forms of slavery in France of which recently-arrived clandestine Chinese migrants are victims. Not hoping for any legal protection, they are dependent on the debt they contracted to migrate to France. The movement of sans-papiers has made it possible to obtain much direct evidence of the terrible working conditions in the underground economy - as well as the difficulties of breaking with the clan-based organizations of Paris's "Chinatowns".

**Before the Olympic Games.** Shortly before the Olympic Games, a "China 2008 Olympics Collective" was created in France by ten associations on the question of human rights. It includes in particular China Solidarity and the League of Human Rights (LDH). Within the LDH, a "China" group gives in particular support to lawyers imprisoned because of their commitment - and the Paris Bar has invited Chinese lawyers. This solidarity action is particularly important considering the role played in China today by "barefoot lawyers" in defence of the poorest sectors of society.

Within the framework of the preparation of the Games, a certain number of movements attempted to make the situation of workers in China better known and to defend their rights. In this context, the Union Syndicale Solidaires (which includes the SUD trade unions), accordingly devoted most of the April 2008 issue of its review *Solidaires International* to this question.

**Tibet.** But what had been envisaged was - as often happens - impacted by the unforeseen: the mobilizations in Tibet, the riots and the repression of them. In the eyes of the media, the Tibetan question took precedence over all the others (not much was said about the Muslim and Mongolian minorities). Public opinion in France is spontaneously favourable to the Tibetans. The main far-left organizations have themselves for a long time defended the right to self-determination of the Tibetan people. However, this principled position of solidarity is accompanied by an inability to act concretely - and also by great ignorance of the history and the present situation of the country. Tibet committees have certainly continued in spite of everything to be abreast with the issue. But, divided and more "cultural" than "political", they have not really contributed to overcoming this ignorance.

The debate in France took a really outrageous turn. The example of the boycott of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games was evoked - as if the Chinese regime were the equivalent of the Nazi state - which is frankly to make Nazism rather banal! Serious and interesting press articles were published on the situation in Tibet as well as in China, but in the denunciations of Beijing, there was a torrent of (anti-communist) ideology - forgetting that capitalism has put up with dictatorships much bloodier than that exercised by the CCP. The anti-Beijing media storm took on such dimensions that a professor, Michel Godet and a former Minister of the Economy, Francis Mer, published in the June 10, 2008 issue of *Le Monde*, an article reminding readers that from a capitalist point of view - precisely! -, the current development of China should be praised and not disparaged. It is in this context that the

association Reporters Without Frontiers (RSF) carried out a series of spectacular actions which had the great merit of popularizing the protest against Chinese repression in Tibet. It unfortunately did not break from the type of wild exaggerations that were current at the time, as if the denunciation of the Beijing Games authorized any excess. Thus, an appeal to demonstrate was signed by the Tibetan, Taiwanese (?) and Chinese (!!) communities in France - whereas a large majority of the aforementioned "Chinese community" did not mobilize against the Games, far from it. What is at issue here is a certain conception of solidarity: spectacular "coups" do not replace the genuinely rigorous (and therefore critical) work of collecting, analysing and spreading information.

**A mixed balance sheet.** So from the point of view of solidarity, the balance sheet of the last few months is mixed. The Tibetan question returned to the centre of political news after a long period of a lapse of memory, which is a very good thing - but nevertheless, the right to self-determination of the Tibetan people was clearly defended only by minority currents (in particular of the far left). And with the opening of the Olympic Games, the Tibetans in fact found themselves more isolated in the international arena than the Beijing authorities.

Journalists, researchers and activists took advantage of the topicality of the Games to make better known the social and political situation in China - however, this work of information was partially hidden by the "makers of ideology" who occupied the media centre stage.

Many initiatives were taken - but they remained fragmented: NGOs support projects or develop partnerships in China, associations help "dissidents" or independent lawyers, trade unions take up working conditions and trade union rights, political organizations try to analyze the evolution of the regime, laboratories working on the climate study the implications of global warming for China...

**Chinese studies.** France is a country which has a long and rich tradition of university Chinese studies. The pupils of Edouard Chavannes - in particular Paul Pelliot, Henri Maspero and Marcel Granet- founded 20<sup>th</sup> century French Sinology. Over the decades, many researchers played a big role, like Jacques Gernet, but also Jean Escarra and Mireille Delmas-Marty for law, Jean Chesneaux for the workers' movement, Lucien Bianco for the peasantry or Marie-Claire Bergère for the history of the Chinese bourgeoisie.

In the university and scientific domain, active collaboration exists today between France and China in various fields, in particular with regard to law, mathematics and their history. The Institute of Political Science has opened a permanent office in Beijing. It is possible that Germany and France are the two countries in Europe which have the most serious networks of exchanges of researchers.

**The future of solidarity.** So politically and culturally, China has counted for a lot in France. But, in a general way, starting from the end of the 1970s, Asia became the poor relation there as far as solidarity was concerned. With some ups and many downs, networks of solidarity were maintained with Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa and Black Africa - this was very little the case with Asia. Associations which, like Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF), concern themselves in priority with Asia are much too small to reverse this tendency on their own.

However, China will remain at the centre of many concerns. There is a diffuse concern among French people about the effects of relocations or of Chinese commercial dumping, as well as a real interest in the situation concerning work, rights and civil liberties in China. This concern and this interest were revived at the time of the "textile crisis" in 2005, with the ending of import quotas. As a report in April 2008 by Global Labour Strategies, "Why China Matters: Labour Rights in the Era of Globalization", underlines, the international struggle in defence of workers is more interdependent than ever. All the more so as Western multinationals operate in China and themselves organize competition between workers of different countries. So the best way to fight for jobs in France is to

actively support Chinese workers - including against French employers when the need arises.

One of the concrete difficulties with which French organizations are confronted in this field is the absence of a "reactive" Chinese trade-union partner. The French cement-manufacturer Lafarge is established in South Korea and China. When workers of a subsidiary were hit by redundancies, Korean trade unionists of the KCTU came to Paris in autumn 2007 to take action against the headquarters of this multinational. They were given hospitality for several months by the CGT federation concerned and also received the support of Solidaires. This type of international co-operation among militants is essential. But when Lafarge carried out massive lay-offs in China, in June of the same year, nothing like that happened.

There is in China only one trade union - the Federation of Chinese Trade Unions (FCTU) - which serves above all as a transmission belt between the government and the workers. The World Trade-Union Confederation (WTUC) is now making contact with the FSC, but it is quite difficult to foresee how the FCTU will evolve - just as it is difficult to envisage the emergence of trade-union pluralism.

Solidarity in France can also popularize and support actions carried out in defence of workers by organizations based in Hong Kong, such as Globalization Monitor. Links were established in December 2005, at the time of the international mobilizations against the WTO in Hong Kong.

Up until now, the development of the global justice movement has not really made it possible to make solidarity with Asia more dynamic, but it has led to the rebirth of an indispensable internationalist spirit. At this time of a world economic and financial crisis, the question of a common defence of workers in the East and the West of the Eurasian continent is particularly relevant and urgent.

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## **P.S.**

\* This article was written for the "EU-China Civil Society Forum" (<http://www.eu-china.net/>), published in Germany. The site, which is above all German-language, also includes documents in English. The German translation of this article is available on this site: [http://eu-china.net/web/cms/front\\_c..](http://eu-china.net/web/cms/front_c..)

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