



China and the Danger of Anti-Western Boycotts

By Frans-Paul van der Putten



Confrontation is escalating between China and the West over human rights and the Olympic Games. One important new development is the call to boycott French products that is circulating among Chinese internet users. Given China's long history of anti-foreign boycotts, this threat of limited market access should be taken seriously. Moreover, the call for a boycott is a sign of growing anti-Western nationalism in China. This political process could have major repercussions in the long run for China's political stability and for Sino-Western relations.

Boycotts of foreign products on the Chinese market are historically closely related to the emergence of Chinese nationalism and the sense of being bullied by the great powers. Boycotts, supported by Chinese consumers and traders alike, were a recurring feature of Sino-Western relations from the late nineteenth century and became particularly significant between 1900 and the 1940s.

The first major nationwide boycott occurred in 1905 and was aimed against American goods. At the time there was a strong perception in China that the US government treated immigrants from China in a harsh and unfair manner. During summer 1905, merchants in major Chinese cities refused to trade in American products. Another major boycott occurred in 1925-1926. This time British-made goods were targeted. The anti-British boycott, which was especially fierce in southern China, was directed at decreasing Britain's political influence over China. In the 1930s there was a widely supported anti-Japanese boycott. There were also numerous smaller anti-foreign boycotts during the early twentieth century; some were supported by the Chinese authorities, and some were not.

These boycotts were both an expression of, and a catalyst for, Chinese nationalism. They helped raise awareness among Chinese consumers of China's political condition, and gave the idea that there was a way to resist the great powers. They also gave political activists a sense of how the

Chinese population could be mobilized for political purposes. The anti-foreign boycott movements laid a basis for the Chinese Nationalist Party and, later, the Chinese Communist Party to come to power in China.

The anti-foreign boycotts, however, were not permanent. After a while they tended to collapse, and trade in foreign products resumed. But while a boycott lasted, sales of the targeted goods went down. Chinese and other foreign competitors gladly made use of the occasion to enlarge their market shares.

Today, access to the Chinese market is still eagerly sought by Western companies. Any widespread boycott targeted at foreign goods limits access to the Chinese market. Up-market consumer brands are especially vulnerable. Barriers to the Chinese market are already a major source of tension between the European Union and China.

Lately the Western response to recent events in Tibet has aroused much anger in China, where France in particular is regarded as anti-Chinese. Like a century ago, popular instinct in China is still to retaliate by limiting market access through consumer movements.

But the real danger for Chinese-Western relations is not so much the immediate impact on economic relations. The Chinese government is likely to keep popular anti-foreign movements

within bounds, especially with the Beijing Olympic Games looming later this summer, but politically-inspired popular movements can be difficult to control. What starts as a pro-government, anti-foreign movement could eventually produce, as a side-effect, open criticism towards the Chinese government itself. Still, in the end it is very difficult for China's government to keep Chinese consumers from boycotting certain products.

The most worrying development takes place at the level of popular perceptions. Many people in the West have come to regard China as a thoroughly repressive state, while there is now great distrust in China towards the West. This widening gulf is undermining the ability of politicians and diplomats on both sides to work towards good international relations.

Like many other countries, China has human rights' problems. But there is little the West can do to help China in this respect. What the West

can do is prevent further deterioration in its relations with China by helping Western populations acquire a more balanced view on China. By frequently and openly insisting that China improves its human rights' record, Western governments have contributed to the one-sided image that many in the West now have, of a China where 1.3 billion people live under a regime of brutal repression. It is highly unlikely that such pressure has a positive effect on the human rights' situation in China. A more likely outcome is further calls for anti-Western consumer boycotts, which will hurt Western business and could eventually destabilize China. These developments would be highly damaging to China and the West alike, and could undermine good relations in the long run.

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