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Boycott Tidbits and Queries: Some News and Views that Didn't Fit

May 2, 2008 in [Frivolous Friday](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

1) Some Questions:

How do you say "I'm from Quebec" in Chinese?

When protesters gathered outside of Carrefour stores in China and sang songs (they must have sung something: one photograph shows someone with a guitar), were any of these reworked versions of "Frere Jacques"?

Why hasn't anyone commenting on the boycotts of 2008 mentioned the one that took place one hundred years ago?

How can focusing on fried chicken alter our sense of the similarities and differences between the Chinese student protests of 1989, 1999, and 2008?

These are some questions that I either started pondering while I was writing my latest piece for the Nation's website, which came out recently under the title "[Battle of the Beijing Boycotts](#)," or that I began to think about after it appeared. I'll explain the background for each question in a minute, but first...

2) A Digression (something blogs allow) about a Side Topic (what blogs allow):

As someone who writes commentaries for newspapers, magazines and online journals of opinion, I see one of the nice possibilities that writing for "The China Beat" opens up is the chance to share tidbits of information or ideas that don't quite fit into works I do for those venues. Sometimes a thought is too obscure (for a magazine that assumes no previous knowledge about China), an opinion too irreverent (for a newspaper intended for serious readers), or an allusion to the past too difficult to communicate concisely (in a genre where word length counts). The blog can also be a place for me to mention things I wish I had thought of when I submitted a time-sensitive piece, but that didn't come to mind until the chance to add things had come and gone. And it can give me an opportunity to point readers to supplemental readings that I agreed with or have a gripe about, when I've written something in a venue that doesn't allow citations. So, this may end up being the first in a series of postings I do that supplement a commentary I've published elsewhere, it could start a trend that other contributors follow (in which case maybe we should add a "Self-Indulgent Sundays" to complement our "Self-Promotion Saturdays" one)—or it could turn out to be just a one-off kind of thing.

3) Finally, Some Explanations

If you are still with me at this point, you deserve to know the stories behind the question posed above. Let's begin with why Quebec, a place I've never been, has been on my mind lately. The answer is simple. When the anti-French agitation began in China last month, many people were reminded, myself included, of the anti-NATO demonstration of 1999. I happened to be in Beijing while those were taking place, and as I mention in the chapter of [China's Brave New World](#) devoted to the topic, one favor that a journalist friend did for me was to tell me how to say "I am Australian" in Chinese, just in case the mood got particularly nasty at any point. This made it natural to muse on how someone from France might use a similar geographical bait and switch to avoid becoming the object of criticism in attack.

The "Frere Jacques" question has deeper historical roots, as I've been tracking for some time the way that the song, which is very easy to put protest lyrics in [any language](#) due to the role of repetition in it, has been adapted by generations of Chinese students. It was sung with "Down with Imperialism" lyrics back in the 1920s and "Down with Deng Xiaoping" ones in 1989 (though some version then focused on the government [having lied to the people](#)), and it was also sung in-between those periods by Red Guards and 1940s activists (one group that wanted to go to Nanjing to present a petition but

couldn't get anyone to take them by train sang "Houche bu kai, houche bu kai, zijia kai, zijia kai"—very rough and meter-free translation: "If the train won't start, if the train won't start, we'll start it, we'll start it"...and the students ultimately drove it themselves). I've also heard that students put new words to the tune in 1999, so why not in 2008?

Of course, the irony would be singing a French song to protest the French. But even that isn't new, as the French were among the imperialist powers that Republican era youths wanted to leave China be, and the Red Guards used the tune at times to denounce all capitalist Western countries. If there is something ironic here, though, it would be very hard to imagine anyone in China thinking of it that way. I once asked a friend who grew up in China during the Mao years if she found it ironic that a French song had been used to denounce the West. She asked me what song, and when I hummed "Frere Jacques," she looked at me quizzically and said she'd always thought of that as a Chinese folk tune.

The 1908 connection is just one that I should have thought of when writing the piece for the Nation. In that commentary I referred to the 1905 anti-American boycott and various anti-Japanese boycotts of 1919 and later years as precedents for the call for a boycott of Carrefour, mostly just trying to show that it was silly to think of the tactic as merely an imitation of Western calls for a boycott of the Olympics. I'm not sure why, as someone who likes to think about round number anniversaries, I temporarily blanked on the [Tatsu Maru incident and the anti-Japanese boycott](#) it inspired exactly a century ago...Maybe that event should be the subject for its own "Its Not Just 8/8/08" posting.

As for Coke and KFC and the relationship between the 1989, 1999 and 2008 student protests, there are some curious ways to take this. For example, though 1989 is generally placed in one category, while 1999 and 2008 are placed in another, focusing on these two American companies shakes things up a bit. There are reports of students gathering at the Colonel's place to talk about protests in [1989](#) and [2008](#), while in 1999, I saw signs go up saying that a good way to show one's patriotism was to boycott KFC. (There are also some interesting things to do with Coca Cola's shift from a target of protest in 1999 to a kind of patriotic drink in 2008, due to the company's sponsorship of the Olympics.)

Finally, three things to read that I either like or disagree with on issues related to the boycott piece...

1. An excellent essay from several years ago by [Geremie Barmé](#) on related themes, which in timely fashion has just been reprinted by Danwei.org to accompany an update on the Carrefour protests.
2. A *Bangkok Post* commentary by Philip Cunningham that has a great title ("[Let One Hundred Boycotts Bloom!](#)") and makes some good points about young Chinese not the only ones who have grown very suspicious of late about the American mainstream media—but errs in presenting the anti-French boycott as an "imitation" of recent Western behavior (and the author, who has done some very fine pieces in the past, has covered East Asia for long enough to be well aware of the problem with this suggestion).
3. The latest weekly update by [AccessAsia.co.uk](#), which does a far better job than I could hope to on squeezing humor out of the current situation (not one that lends itself to much frivolity). They are an excellent source of both insight and amusement, a site definitely worth book-marking. Their best line from this week is that by manifesting "dislike of the French," we surely have a "sign that China is now fully part of globalised populist opinion." Which just leaves me wondering, is there a Chinese translation for "freedom fries"?