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EU-China Civil Society Forum

Between human rights dialogue and calls to boycott:

Perceptions and demands of human rights organizations

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Introductory remarks:

- Focus will be on a selection of human right NGOs. German chapters of:
 - amnesty international (ai),
 - Human Rights Watch (HRW),
 - Reporters without Borders (RSF),
 - Society for Threatened People (GfbV),
 - International Society for Human Rights (IGFM/ISHR)
- This presentation will be a kind of generalization, but of course there are exceptions, especially with smaller organizations not mentioned here.

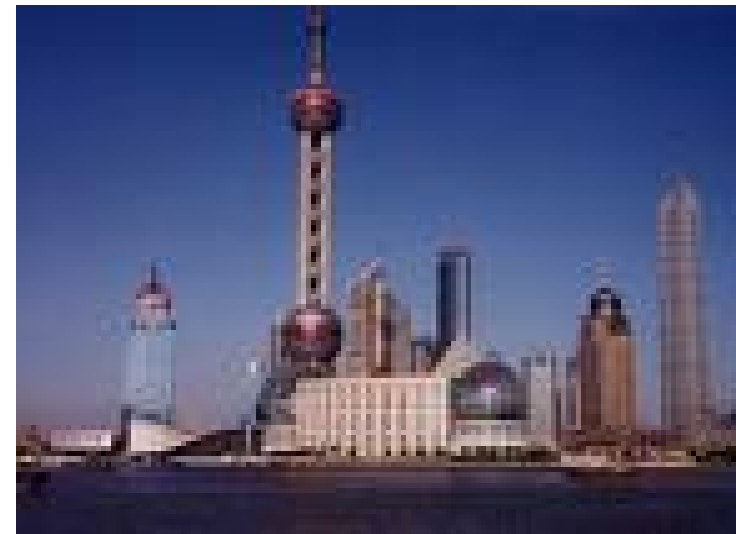
Which China-images do European human rights organizations provide?

Journalist at first visit to China is astonished to hardly notice any repressive system: Unlike Latin America in the 1970s or South Korea in the 1980s not much visible/sensible military or police presence, also relative openness of the Chinese people, who are less shy talking politics than people in Japan or Singapore

--> images provided by Western media/human rights organizations create expectations of visible/sensible repression, which is not easily experienced at least in big cities. Vibrant/globalizing China is different from stagnant and dull former socialist Eastern Europe.



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Observations

- Most European human rights organizations are selective in their country approach (i.e. more critical of China than Saudi Arabia)
- Most human rights organizations are selective in their China approach:
 - China focus since 1980s, but not in 1960s or 70s
 - stressing individual & political rights, neglecting collective, environmental/health & economic rights), i.e. stress on individual dissidents but hardly work on expulsion/forced resettlement, environmental/health rights, minority focus on Tibet and Uighurs
- Dominant confrontational campaign style (“bad news is good news”): sharp critical focus instead of more balanced/constructive approach
- Lack of dialogue with China (different reasons): Target group is mostly Western audience (public, media, politics, business) and not China (neither government, nor media or public

Example: Reporters without borders (RSF)

- RSF lists China on its press freedom index on place 163 from 167 countries. According to RSF China has the highest number of imprisoned journalists (33) and cyber dissidents (51 or about 4/5 worldwide). There is indeed no free press in China and the figures of RSF are probably true (luckily journalists in China don't get killed as much as in other countries)
- However, despite ups and downs (currently down) and despite ongoing taboos (like the “three Ts”: Tiananmen, Taiwan and Tibet) and overall unsatisfactory situation information freedom in China has grown due to the commercialization of the media and the spread of the internet (despite controls) and of mobile phones. But this is hardly reflected in campaigns by RSF and many other human rights organizations.

- Chinese civil society actors don't trust their media, they have learned to read between the lines and to get additional information from the internet, partly circumventing controls. However, they regard the Chinese media as their potential partner in exposing corruption, environmental scandals or contradictions between central and regional government bodies.
- I think RSF is aware of this contradictory role of Chinese media, but neglects the positive aspects which Chinese civil society actors see in media development.
- The ranking (press freedom index) and using superlatives in regard to China (highest number of ...in the world) is problematic. If using figures a per capita ration might give a more realistic and fair picture.

- Chinese civil society actors probably don't agree with this RSF-poster (comparable with recent frontpage of “Der Spiegel”). The poster might help to highlight problems for a campaign in the West, but is probably not suitable for dialogue with Chinese activists
- Chinese civil society actors – partly orchestrated and used by the regime – are starting to highlight contradictions in Western media





China trainiert für Olympia.

Example of polarizing campaign style: IGFM/ISHR:

(anti-communist HR-
organization
focussing on socialist
and islamist
countries only)



China trainiert für Olympia.



China trainiert für Olympia.



Example amnesty international (ai)

ai has a more differentiated and constructive approach, acknowledging contradictory developments and stressing human rights (instead of human rights violations) in its current campaign.

Different experiences with this approach:

- January: parliamentary hearing on Olympics and human rights with majority of positive views by other experts. Ai not able to make a contrast with its balanced view, instead its critique got diluted by positive voices.
- April: Workshop for journalists covering the Olympics. Balanced view was helpful in preparing for Chinese realities/contradictions.



Example Human Rights Watch

“Legal reforms proceeded at a fast pace in 2007 in order to achieve the CCP’s overriding goal of making the rule of law ‘the principal tool to govern the country.’

New legislation was adopted on a wide range of issues such as property rights, labor contracts, administration of lawyers, access to public records, and the handling of emergencies.

But the party’s continued dominance over, and interference with, judicial institutions, as well as weak and inconsistent enforcement of judicial decisions, means that overall the legal system remains vulnerable to arbitrary interference.

Ordinary citizens face immense obstacles to accessing justice, in particular over issues such as illegal land seizures, forced evictions, environmental pollution, unpaid wages, corruption, and abuse of power by local officials.”



Difficulties:

- Fundamental problem remains: CCP stays above the law. Ongoing taboos set up by the Chinese government / CCP
- Polarized situation (friend or foe thinking)
- Mutual mistrust, competition between Chinese/European officials
- Contradictory policy of European/Western actors: „war on terror“ dilutin human rights standards
- No real dialogue Chinese government with European NGOs/
European governments with Chinese civil society actors

Way forward:

- More dialogue/exchange/cooperation with civil society
- More support for Chinese agents of change (human rights lawyers, environmental & labour activists, journalists/bloggers)
- More differentiation, less black and white thinking
- Stronger focus on putting Chinese laws into practice
- More consistent European/Western human rights policies