

## **Chinese to boycott French brands**

**Angry consumers retaliate for torch relay protests in Paris**

By [Normandy Madden](#)



**A boycott could hit sales at Carrefour stores in China (Photo by Mark Ralston)**

**BEIJING—Frustrated by the torch relay protests in countries like France, the U.K. and the U.S., Chinese have found an outlet to display deeply-felt nationalistic support for their government and their country's position as host of the 2008 Olympic Games.**

**They have called for a boycott of their own, in retaliation for last week's Olympic torch-relay protests in Paris. Initially, the campaign was limited to retailer Carrefour but has quickly expanded to include virtually all French brands.**

**Communicating through phone calls, e-mail and text messages, bulletin boards and online blogs and videos placed on Chinese sites like Youku.com, Chinese activists are calling on consumers to stop shopping at Carrefour next month. Angry Chinese went after that company first because they believe Carrefour's management financially support pro-Tibetan independence groups.**

**A public rally is scheduled to take place outside a Carrefour store in Beijing on May 1, marking the 100-day countdown to the Olympics, starting Aug. 8. Carrefour has more than 100 outlets around the country. Spokesmen at Carrefour's office in China could not be reached for comment.**

**The boycott calls were first posted last weekend through open letters on sites such as web portal Chinaren (www.chinaren.com). One letter said, "Adding the French people's support for Tibetan separatists during the Paris leg of the torch relay, there is truly no reason to give the French money by buying their goods....Let them see Chinese people's power and the power of the internet."**

**Another said, "We suggest you go shopping in other supermarkets instead of Carrefour....The empty Carrefour on May 1 will send a message to western countries that China should not be humiliated and the Chinese people should not**

be bullied."

A boycott could impact companies beyond Carrefour. The French retail giant is 10.7% owned by Blue Capital, a holding company owned by the property group Colony Capital and French billionaire Bernard Arnault, who is chairman and CEO of LVMH Group.

LVMH owns dozens of brands such as Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Givenchy, Donna Karan, TAG Heuer, Christian Dior, Guerlain and Hennessy. China is now one of the largest consumer markets in the world for both luxury designer clothing, accessories, cosmetics and high-end spirits, particularly cognac.

By April 15, the boycott call had expanded to include all French companies, even though protests also took place in London and San Francisco. The focus on France is largely due to two incidents. Chinese were outraged when photographs turned up in local media of torchbearer Jin Jing, a Chinese female Paralympic fencer. When she was attacked by angry protesters in Paris on April 7, the wheelchair-bound athlete refused to relinquish the torch from her grip, turning her into a national icon at home and a symbol of what the Chinese consider a bias against their country.

The attack also angered Jacques Rogge, president of the International Olympic Committee, who stated on April 10 that any attempt to take the torch from the athletes was destroying a dream. "What shocked me most is when someone tried to rob the torch off a wheelchair athlete, a disabled athlete who was unable to defend the torch," he said. "This is unacceptable."

Anti-French fervor intensified after French President Nicolas Sarkozy threatened to boycott the Olympics' opening ceremony.

"It's becoming all French brands, not just LVMH but also companies like L'Oreal," said Greg Paull, principal of Beijing-based consulting firm R3, which tracks the brand awareness and performance of major Olympic sponsors in China. "The boycott is pretty extensive and it's not the work of a couple of crackpots. It's getting a lot of traction and it looks like a coordinated approach."

Chinese calls for a boycott are the latest stage in a propaganda war that China is waging against western protestors, who are calling for China to end its occupation of Tibet. International media has been accused on Chinese blogs and internet forums of biased coverage of protests by pro-independence groups supporting Tibet, as well as the deadly riots that took place last month in the Tibetan capital Lhasa.

The tense situation has led to calls by some International Olympic Committee

executives to reduce the scope of the global torch relay.

So far, Olympic sponsors, and in particular the three torch relay sponsors, Lenovo, Coca-Cola and Samsung, have decided to continue with their original plans surrounding the torch relay. That is mainly because they are promoting the relay heavily within China, where enthusiasm about the upcoming Olympic Games remains high. Many believe local fervor has increased since the overseas protests began, as Chinese rally to support their country.

"People here are very supportive [of the Olympics and the torch relay]. We're seeing more positiveness than ever," Mr. Paull said.