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"Take one, take all!": Media coverage of the first Chinese boat people's case in New Caledonia

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In April 1998 an agreement was reached between the main pro and anti-independence groups in New Caledonia that foreshadowed the granting of considerable political autonomy to the territory. The Noumea Accords, as the agreement was called, also put issues of identity at the centre of the political debate. From the moment of the ratification of the Accords on 8 November 1998, the classification of New Caledonia's population changed. Those who settled before 1988 acquired French and New Caledonian citizenship and were designated as "citizens". Those who arrived after 1988 could only be considered French citizens, and were called "nationals". The local media, which has a habit of ignoring sensitive political issues, has refused to discuss this distinction. However, it is clear that it will change deeply the conceptions the different Caledonian communities have of themselves.

One of these communities is a group of around 270 "Chinese" who have arrived in New Caledonia (or been born there) at various times over the past 75 years. On 5 and 17 November 1997 the size of this community increased considerably. Two ramshackled *pekai* containing 110 Chinese boat people landed on the West coast of New Caledonia. The arrival of the boat people at this time was particularly sensitive politically because it fed into a debate in the territory over immigration policy that had been rife for some time. Pro-independence groups, mostly comprised of indigenous Melanesians, had long called for a halt to further immigration into the territory which, they argued, had the effect of diminishing their electoral capacity. In contrast, anti-independence groups tended to support further immigration.
Reaction to these new arrivals was therefore strong and varied amongst the various communities that make up New Caledonia. This paper is concerned with how the local mainstream media reported on their arrival and how they engaged with and responded to this public reaction. One hundred and forty nine articles were published on the subject between 4 November 1997 and 4 September 1998 in *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, the territory’s monopoly daily newspaper. Before considering these, however, I give a brief overview of the events surrounding, and subsequent to, the boat people’s arrival.

The two rafts, one of which landed at Teoudie (Gomen) and the other in Noumea, came from the island of Hainan. Both had set out two months earlier, apparently independently. While they were not part of an organised ring, the clandestine migrants had been able to purchase a trouble-free departure and had with them a sea map that mentioned “France, New Caledonia”. A drift caused the first *pekai* to reach the Australian coast where it was stopped by coast guards who subsequently accompanied the raft to the Torres Strait and alerted French authorities. The second raft also appears to have been redirected from Australian waters, this time by the Australian navy.

Upon the arrival of the first craft, the Direction centrale pour le contrôle de l’immigration clandestine et la lutte contre le travail clandestin (DICILEC) searched the boat and confiscated all personal papers. The occupants declared that they had freely sought the closest French territory because, in their view, France represented respect for human rights.

On 11 November, the now illegal immigrants were moved to accommodation in a building belonging to the education section of the territorial hospital. When they arrived, the second group was immediately transferred by bus to an old run down army base (without windows or doors) situated near the international airport of Tontouta. They were joined by the second group on 24 November. On 26 November, the non-governmental organisation *Medecins du Monde* signed a convention with the State to secure the good health of the boat people who, by this time, were guarded by gendarmes and were about to have their accommodation encircled with barbed wire and all contact with the outside world prohibited. They were also required to report twice daily to authorities. The High Commissioner of France in New Caledonia, Dominique Bur, justified this de facto detention with an officialordonnance of 13 July 1937 that regulated the status of foreigners landing in the colony.

On 1 December, representatives from the local Catholic
church visited the High Commission to demand a negotiated and humane solution for the refugees, thirty of whom were Catholic. People opposed to immigration also mobilised, creating the group SIDEL (Stop a l'Immigration et Défense de l'Emploi Local). The response from the High Commissioner to these conflicting demands was a reiteration of a declaration made by the Overseas Secretary of State that the boat people would be sent away from the territory.

The Collectif d'Urgence Humanitaire sent an open letter to French President, Jacques Chirac, informing him that (from first accounts translated from Cantonese) the boat people were demanding asylum, considering that their lives would be in grave danger if they were forced to return to China. Shortly afterwards, the High Commissioner received the first 90 demands for asylum. Following news of a secret plan to send the boat people in small groups back to China via Japan, the Collectif d'Urgence Humanitaire called on citizens to intervene. In January, the High Commissioner received further asylum demands. Following this, the administration authorised that the Chinese could be interviewed in the presence of their lawyer with the assistance of a translator. On 4 February 1998, the lawyer lodged a complaint over acts of violence and arbitrary detention. In response, the administration closed the camp to humanitarian organisations.

On 13 March, the High Commissioner announced that a few people were to receive temporary residence status while the others would be sent back to China. On 16 March, one hundred immigration police officers from DICILEC arrived to effect the repatriation. The Chinese responded by climbing onto the roof of the temporary camp, where they stayed for 36 hours, before being forced down by rubber bullets. Nine were wounded, two seriously.

Caledonians began to mobilise with banners, sit-ins, and verbal confrontations with gendarmes. By the end of the morning of Sunday 22 March, demonstrators of many ethnic and political hues invaded the airport with their children. At noon, the administrative tribunal announced that an appeal had been lodged to annul the decision to repatriate the Chinese. In the evening, after a lot of equivocation, the Chinese were freed and transferred to Noumea. Sixty-five Caledonian families agreed, as a matter of urgency, to accommodate the refugees, while many others offered material assistance to the committees set up to defend the Chinese refugees. After a few weeks silence from the administration, the High Commissioner finally issued the papers needed to apply for temporary stay. Without any income, right to work, social cover, or entitlement to the French laws applicable to French asylum seekers, their integration into Caledonian society and its economic structures has yet to take place.
Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes considers itself part of the information press: a newspaper attending to events and to the different interpretations made by the various cultural, economic and political actors of the territory. The articles of the newspaper therefore purport to be descriptive and neutral. This claim sits somewhat at odds with the paper’s ownership by the Hersant metropolitan press group, which is well known for its support for the French right. It also sits at odds with popular local perception of the newspaper which has, at times, failed to report on contentious local issues, and has been accused of reporting in a biased fashion, privileging particular stories and accounts over others. In addition, each Thursday the paper publishes a weekly insert, Les Nouvelles Hebdo, which is produced by the “Lafleur group” – the business group of the territory’s leading conservative politician, Jacques Lafleur, who is the leader of the main conservative political party, the Rassemblement Pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR). The daily is known for its loyalist sentiments and for its support for immigration. Demonstrating that this relationship exists is not the aim of this paper. Rather, it is to explore how this relationship impacted on reporting on the boat people’s case.

The editorial staff of Les Nouvelles were as surprised as anyone at the arrival of the boat people. While they were assessing the situation, they tried clearly to adopt a neutral position by communicating information about the arrival in a non-emotive fashion, relying on reported information from the Australian press and immigration services. (Les Nouvelles, 4 November 1997). But significant elements already appear in their reporting.

The first story could have been treated like a scoop. Instead, the first two articles were published in the fait divers (general interest) section, suggesting that the editorial staff were seeking to downplay the political significance of the event while difficult negotiations were taking place within political circles in Noumea. Journalists also avoided interviewing political figures. The first political reaction had to await nine days after the arrival of the first craft, with the publication of an open letter sent to the High Commissioner from the pro-independence PALiKA (Le Parti de Libération Kanak) group stating that “it is for Kanaks, as the indigenous people of this country, to exercise the right of welcome”, meaning that if pro-independence groups did not choose to welcome these illegal immigrants, they would not (Les Nouvelles, 14 November 1997). It was only from this moment that the issue was allowed to take a political turn in the pages of Les Nouvelles.

This political turn was reflected in Les Nouvelles’ treatment of stories. In an article published on 7 November, mention was
made three times that water in the hold of the now abandoned *pekai* was rising hour by hour. The second mention came from Gomen Mayor, Alain Levant, who is of Asiatic descent and who commented that: “they ... are no longer maintaining the boat and are doing nothing to get rid of the water that is rising in the hold”, suggesting that the *pekai* had been abandoned and that the boat people were closer to being installed in the territory. In the last reference to this problem, the journalist took the opportunity to congratulate the captain on his “unbelievable odyssey”, thus giving the event a positive connotation.

Similarly, an article published on 6 January 1998 mentioned that free lessons were being given by a teacher on holidays from France to 12 adults and 18 children, commenting that: “Every day they watch television attentively, bathing themselves in sound so that they will be able to talk in our idiom in six months”. This comment similarly suggested that the boat people were there to stay.

*Les Nouvelles* also sought to flatter the generosity of its supportive readers. Articles published in November 1997 insisted on the destitution of the Chinese boat people and on the generosity of different territorial groups towards them, amongst them the inhabitants of Kaala-Gomen, the members of the Chinese community, and other religious and humanitarian organisations (*Les Nouvelles*, 14 November 1997). This culminated in the publication on 25 November of a boxed article that emphasised the “Merci!” of the captain of the first ship who was reported as saying: “We are very aware of what Caledonians and the French administration are doing for us”.

The debate that emerged in the paper was mostly separated from local issues, so that it appeared unrelated to political considerations and the self-centred interests of different groups. Thus, the paper never highlighted the fact that the people fighting for a “humane solution” were, first of all, Catholics, most of whom are loyalist, or that numerous partisans of mainstream or conservative right-wing political groups were those who attended boat people support meetings. The paper did, however, distinguish the humanitarian discourse from that of extremist right-wing parties that also supported the boat people’s right to remain in the territory. While this approach of separating the issues from local politics might be considered extremely healthy, it was not pursued in relation to the anti-immigration position. A anti-immigration meeting held on 17 November that only attracted 200 demonstrators, all of whom were members of small pro-
independence parties that were also calling for an end to the immigration of metropolitan French, elicited a long commentary in *Les Nouvelles* (18 November 1997).

In addition, the humanitarian debate that developed in France was not mirrored in New Caledonia. This was probably because the group leading this debate in France, the League of Human Rights, is not liked by loyalists because of its criticism over the political situation in the territory during the 1980s. References to the regular arrival of boat people in Australia were also kept largely quiet. The High Commissioner nonetheless declared on 13 March that “during the last 10 years, 2,264 Chinese refugees have arrived in Australia and 1,941 have been sent back to their countries” (*Les Nouvelles*, 13 March 1998).

From the beginning, rumour abounded about the possibility that the first boat’s arrival was the result of the activities of an organised ring. According to the rumour, the two boats had been chartered by the Chinese Mafia/triads, who were also supported secretly by the Chinese State. *Les Nouvelles*, which was not always averse to publishing rumours, refused to publish this one until the arrival of a second *pekai* gave further vent to it. Even then, the paper only quoted the Director of the Office of the High Commissioner’s comment that: “we have to find out whether local contacts have made it possible for these Chinese to come to Caledonia” (*Les Nouvelles*, 18 November 1997). The newspaper did not publish the rumour that the two *pekai* were chartered by the same group or had at least left China as a team, but later published a refutation of it.

On 25 November, a two-page article on the transfer of the passengers from the first *pekai* to Tontouta hinted that there was no relationship between the two groups of boat people by suggesting “an atmosphere of unease, discomfort even” during the first contacts, and commenting that “there was no communication”. The rumour that several, if not most, of the refugees where criminals was also circulating freely. The paper never gave expression to this rumour that was subsequently disproven. Finally the rumour went around that the two *pekai* had been sent to New Caledonia as scouts. According to this, “*armadas*” were to follow, and every year -- every month even -- more than 100 refugees would be asking for political asylum. *Les Nouvelles* only cautioned against this rumour (*Les Nouvelles*, 18 November 1997).
Over and above the 149 articles published in *Les Nouvelles*, 16 cartoons appeared, all of which favoured the boat people’s cause. The cartoonist Gielbe, in particular, took a political angle, using the event to lampoon pro-independence parties. This use of cartoons to support the pro-immigration position is even clearer in the case of *Les Nouvelles Hebdo*. The weekly did not publish any articles on the boat people during the period under consideration. However, each issue published between 5 November 1997 and 15 January 1998 contained a cartoon on the boat people and all were in favour of the Chinese.

**Les Nouvelles attempts balance**

When, on 18 November, *Les Nouvelles* published the anti-immigration reactions of certain political parties, they combined it with a very beautiful, long and moving text from the group *Secours catholique*, which, it appeared, had been elicited by editorial staff as a “response” to these reactions. This open letter appealed to the community to refuse xenophobia, and included an appeal to the Christian faith held by the majority of Caledonians, as well as to the dignity and the honour of those already well provided for. In a similar manner, when *Les Nouvelles* published on 22 December the decision from Paris, it was accompanied by an official statement from the Masonic order and a letter from the humanitarian collective to the President of the Republic.

On 19 November, the newspaper reported that 700 people had demonstrated against immigration the previous day. The newspaper was told about the demonstration beforehand but did not give details of its organisation, as it sometimes does. On 22 November, the newspaper published details of an anti-immigration demonstration that was to be held on the same day beginning at 8 am -- giving, in other words, the information at the last moment in an attempt to undermine its usefulness. This tactic was again used on 12 December.

**The will to minimise anti-immigration sentiment**

The fact that this will existed is evident from the disparity in space accorded each of the viewpoints. After the first anti-immigration demonstration, the paper published three full pages defending the refugees (*Les Nouvelles*, 20 November 1997). These pages included a long interview in which the High Commissioner called for serenity and “responsibility from all”, as well as a two-page article discussing the refugees from the second *pekai*, mobilising images of women and children to enhance the article’s emotive impact. In contrast, an article on the demonstration
against the boat people, published on 18 December, was written by an anonymous journalist who declared that only a few people were there, and those, to boot, “In vain, or almost, since taking into account the people who came for the concert that was to follow, less than a hundred people were present. This failure did not stop a number of speakers demanding that the Chinese boat people leave immediately”. 

Les Nouvelles also vested effort in making New Caledonians sensitive to the plight of the boat people. On 24 November, a boxed article informed New Caledonians that Paris unofficially favoured the return of the Chinese to their country. This bit of leaked information, presented as unofficial and coming from a secondary source, could only have come from a high-ranking bureaucrat. The letters’ column came to the aid of the anti-immigration position, featuring three letters in favour of the boat people along with an announcement from the churches asking “all Christian communities to adhere to the logic of their christening on the meaning of man”.

Later, the newspaper published an orchestrated wave of articles strongly favouring the boat people on humanitarian grounds. On 22 December 1997, a letter from the Collectif d’Urgence Humanitaire, addressed to the French President, was published in its entirety on page 4. On the same page, there was a full-length message from some Masonic Lodges asking for the Chinese refugees not to be sent back. It is noteworthy that the Masonic Lodges have only ever sent three press releases, one of which was after the murder of the pro-independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou and another to defend the Chinese refugees.

In a series of emphatic articles, Les Nouvelles published very moving testimonies from the boat people. An article on 23 December began: “they were tortured, imprisoned, persecuted, sentenced to death, or forcefully aborted”. The paper conveyed the information that the humanitarian collective had gathered 90 testimonies, generally in Chinese, of which 14 had already been translated. Mrs Wu’s forced abortion after seven months of pregnancy is reported, as is Mr Chen’s political troubles. The paper then opened its columns to the SIDEL collective that represented the anti-immigration views held by many in New Caledonia, but its views were reported in an exaggerated manner (Les Nouvelles, 20 December 1997).

From 29 December 1997, reporting on the boat people diminished considerably for a couple of months, largely as a result of the usual Caledonian summer school holiday break. This allowed the situation to cool down while further ensconcing the Chinese boat people in the territory. The number of articles also fell sharply after the release of the boat people on 23 April 1998.
For *Les Nouvelles*, it was not an event any more, particularly as no other boat people had arrived. The editorial staff of *Les Nouvelles* were aware of the problems created by their dispersal between families in Noumea but only reported minimally on the issue of their integration into Caledonian society. A long article on the situation of the refugees published on 14 May began with the appeasing words: "Everything is for the best in the best of worlds".

Therefore, through the various editorial tactics addressed above, the editorial staff of *Les Nouvelles* influenced public opinion in favour of the Chinese boat people. Viewed separately, no one tactic had overall significance in this process of influence. However, the accumulation of tactics left no doubt as to the viewpoint of the editorial board of the daily paper. In a political context where power resides with a local political oligarchy which is also in a very strong economic position and which unofficially controls the press through its control of the advertising market, it is perhaps little wonder that *Les Nouvelles’* reporting of the boat people’s case was somewhat deliberative.

NOTES

1 The article has been translated from French by Joelle van der Mensbrugghe and Alaine Chanter.
2 The size of the headings is particularly meaningful when the average size of 4.5 mm in the 19 articles unfavourable to the boat people is compared to the average of 6.2 mm for articles favourable to the boat people.
3 The number of illustrations used with the 149 articles -- on average 1.1 per article -- is instructive. It shows how much space was given to the emotional aspects of the event, as well as the paper’s decision to give it a very conspicuous presence. The percentage of colour photos is also important in this regard. Most photographs are of a reasonable size, 15.7% of them being very large.

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