

Doing business for aeons

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The lofty theory, and tough reality, of a link between two peoples who have always known the meaning of diaspora



IT IS an easy speech to write. At any meeting between dignitaries from Greece and China, dutiful reference is made to the two nations' ancient cultures, both of which left a tangible legacy in the shape of high-quality ceramics, sculptures and the musings of poets and philosophers. A bit more daringly, it might be noted that the two nations have been pinching one another's secrets for at least 1,500 years—since Christian monks smuggled silkworm eggs from China to Byzantium in hollow canes.

And anyone who has the patience to peruse government websites will discover that 2008 is "Hellenic Year in China"—as the larger nation (by a factor of more than 100) succeeds the smaller as host of a sporting festival that began in Greece. Beijing's theatre-goers are duly being treated to a new interpretation of the classical play, "Medea", by Dimitris Papaioannou, a Greek director whose dazzling shows began and ended the 2004 Olympics. And George Koumentakis, who put together the music for the 2004 games, has gracious things to say about the Beijing opening—"subtle rather than ostentatious, worthy of an emerging superpower that feels quite comfortable with its past."

But look away from those diplomatic dinners and gala performances, and consider the real lives of people, rich and poor, with an eye for the chances offered by a globalising world. It turns out that the Chinese and the Greeks are interacting in all sorts of hard-headed ways, never dreamed of by a cultural attaché or choreographer.

Most obviously, quite a few Greek shipowners have become billionaires since 2004 thanks to the "China trade": the transport of coal, oil, iron ore and other bulk commodities which stoke China's growth. Last year Greek ships carried about 60% of China's imports of raw materials. Greek owners have poured a sizeable percentage of their profits back into China in the form of orders for new ships. With the big state-owned Chinese yards now working at full capacity, small private ones have entered the game—leaving many a bemused Greek buyer stranded in the Chinese boondocks, wondering whether his would-be suppliers really can bang a ship together.

Although this growth may be starting to slow—bulk freight rates are down 30% from a peak in May—the Greek shipping industry will continue benefiting from long-term charter deals with existing customers. As one Greek banker says, "this has been a once-in-a-century shipping boom."

The Greek government, too, is deeply involved in business with China. In June Cosco, the biggest Chinese state-owned shipping company, won a tender to build and operate a new container terminal at the port of Piraeus. A 35-year concession gives China access to a strategic hub for exports to Western Europe and the emerging markets of the Black Sea. The deal should bring investment of more than €600m (\$900m) and create 1,000 dockers' jobs. "The Chinese were desperate for a foothold in the Mediterranean and we were able to provide it," purrs a Greek official.

For a much grittier slice of Sino-Hellenic reality, visit some of the poor parts of Athens, or certain Greek islands, where Chinese retailers—selling cheap consumer goods, especially clothes—have become part of the urban landscape.

The local Hellenes are at once bemused, suspicious and surreptitiously grateful. Since 1990, once-homogenous Greece has received a vast influx of labour migrants from ex-communist Europe, Africa and Asia. But the Chinese, mostly from the south-eastern provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian, are unlike all the others—they don't come as cheap labourers, but as small entrepreneurs with capital of their own. The rigour of life in their home regions has made them pretty robust: those areas were dirt-poor in the final years of the Maoist era but boomed after being declared special economic zones. And just like many Greek islands, that bit of China has a long memory of sending its brightest sons overseas to seek their fortunes.

Compared with the Albanian builders and Filipino nurses who also live in Athens, the city's Chinese community is elusive. The lanterns that mark out Chinese shops are easy to spot—but the number of Chinese people visible on the street, or even at the till, is small.

A rumour mill gone crazy

This "invisibility" fuels many myths, says Tracey Rosen, a doctoral student who is studying the 30,000 or so Chinese who live in Greece. There are rumours that all their merchandise is made on ships on the high seas, where no labour laws apply, and that it can be dangerous—televisions that explode, underwear that gives you a rash. On Crete, says Ms Rosen, local Greeks rarely admit going to Chinese stores; they say the only customers are other poor immigrants. But older Greek women, in particular, do quietly patronise the Chinese, often getting clothes for daughters and granddaughters whose extravagance risks busting the family budget. In some contexts, the words "cheap" and "Chinese" are interchangeable. When a Greek electronics chain tells its customers that "we've become Chinese!" that means a sale is on.

With no more than minimal Greek, the Chinese have little to do with the local police, and get scant help when their cash or merchandise is stolen. Most retailers are young couples who leave their children in the care of grandparents back in China, and their life in Greece can be hard.

On the road from the Cretan port of Heraklion to the south coast, there is a Chinese shop in almost every settlement—even, for example, in Agia Varvara, whose other features are one paved intersection, a bread shop and a garage. The young retailer from Wenzhou in Zhejiang province laments, in a south Chinese twang, that business is "pretty bad"—and his neighbour, the Greek baker, rather pointedly concurs.

But some Cretans have warmer words for the newcomers. "We are all children under God," declares a local lady in a village near Rethymnon. She likes the fact that the Chinese are clean and polite—and feels sorry for the ordinary Chinese vendors in the local street-market who seem to be working under the sway of a rich and powerful compatriot.

In kinder moments, Greeks recall the deep commonality between all people who know the bittersweet experience of diaspora—an experience that involves responding nimbly to every opportunity, in the knowledge that it may end very quickly. One example: the hardy folk from the Greek island of Kefalonia who migrated, after 1900, to Manchuria, where they flourished in

the liquor and property business. Their world collapsed in 1949 when the Communists took power.

Sociology and economics aside, any relationship between two nations also comes down to individuals who straddle the gap in surprising ways. Take Ioannis Solos, a young practitioner of traditional medicine from the Greek town of Agrinion who lives in Beijing. Having studied for five years under top Chinese professors, he now co-writes learned papers on Eastern medicine in Mandarin, drawing on a deep knowledge of ancient Chinese philosophy and cosmology. "I've gradually come to realise that Chinese thought is very simple and very profound," he says. "When I was a child in Greece, my friends called me *o kinezos*—the Chinese—but they didn't know how prophetic the nickname was."

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