Snapshots of Sino-Muslim students living in Egypt

Shuang WEN

THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA resumed sending Chinese Muslim students to al-Azhar University in Egypt in 1982. A small number of the students are sent by the Islamic Association of China, headquartered in Beijing, and approved by the Chinese Embassy in Cairo. These students can enjoy the benefits of an education exchange agreement between the PRC and Egypt, i.e., they can live in the international student dorms at al-Azhar University and receive a modest monthly stipend. Most, however, travel on their own initiative; they are unable to enjoy the benefits of the education exchange agreement and have to fend for themselves. So when the Arab Spring broke out in January 2011, their lives in Egypt suddenly became uncertain. Below are two snapshots of these self-funded Chinese-speaking Sino-Muslim students.1

Nabil

Nabil comes from a pious Muslim family in Henan. He went to Egypt in 2008 to study Islamic law at al-Azhar University, aspiring to become an Ahong (a Chinese term for imam) upon graduation. Because he did not have much prior knowledge of Islamic studies or the Arabic language, he did not receive a fellowship from the Islamic Association in China. However, he was very driven and passionate about his studies. When the uprising in Egypt erupted, his family members wanted him to return. However, just like many of his fellow Muslim students from around the world, he was excited about the revolution. He saw that people were fighting for democracy and their rights, and he felt that was what he wanted to fight for as well. Feeling inspired, he made a conscious choice to stay in order to witness the unfolding of a historical event in the Islamic world. He believed that this experience would strengthen his faith and enrich his personal growth in life.

Khalid

Khalid is originally from Henan as well, but his family is not particularlystrict with religious practice. Not being able to pass the college entrance exam, he went to Al-Azhar University simply out of curiosity for the outside world. Although the tuition and living expenses in Egypt are not beyond the affordability of his family, they are still a financial burden. After a few years of trying, Khalid still could not pass the Arabic language exam, let alone enter a degree program. Feeling ashamed and not wanting to return home empty handed, he decided to open a Chinese restaurant in the neighborhood of the international students dorm of Al-Azhar University. Although Khalid had not been particularly good at academic studies, he did manage his business well. Hand pulled noodles, stir-fries and hotpots attracted many curious diners. Khalid not only earned enough profit to pay back the original financial support from his family, but also sent extra money back to Henan. However, as the Arab Spring continued, many international Muslim students – Khalid’s restaurant’s major cliental – left Egypt. If the political uncertainty continued, he would not be able to keep the restaurant afloat. However, if Khalid returned to China without Arabic language skills or religious training, his employment prospects would be bleak, which was the reason for him to leave in the first place. Khalid found his niche in Egypt, but his way of making a living is threatened by the political instability. To leave or to stay, that was a big question for him when he met his family in July 2013. In the end, he was decided by his wife and a Sufi master, to stay in Egypt for another year.

References

1 Sino-Muslim is a term coined by scholar Jonathan Lipman in his book Familiar Strangers (University of Washington Press, 1997). Names of the Sino-Muslim students in this essay are not their real names.