

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 who held prior grudges for personal reasons became supportive of each other, as if they were united by a moment of uncertainty. Feeling inspired, he made a conscientious 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 particularly strict with religious practice. Not being able to pass the college entrance exam in China, 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 clientele – 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 I met him in July 2013.

Khalid's case is by no means unique among Sino-Muslim students at al-Azhar University. In fact, a majority of them are like him. Not being able to enter a college in China, they went to Egypt without much religious or Arabic language knowledge, or even awareness of what to expect. As a result, they needed to first take prerequisite language classes. However, as the Arabic language is very difficult, most of them cannot pass the language exam after repeated trials, which means they cannot enter the Al-Azhar University degree program either. Out of frustration or financial constraints, they drop out of school, but have managed to make the best of their experience in Egypt by finding different jobs to make a living. Some Sino-Muslim students work in marble-making, shoe-making, and plastic recycling factories. Others sell small made-in-China inexpensive products at the Khan al-Khalili market. Some even become door-to-door sales persons or tour guides. For them, Egypt has become a place of survival rather than religious learning.

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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.

CONFERENCES IN CHINA

You Must Create?

7-9 April 2016, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong
<http://acgs.uva.nl/news-and-events/news/content/2016/04/you-must-create.html>

You must create – to be less bored, to be more authentic, to be free in the digital world? These questions were the linchpin of a three-day event of conferencing and site visits held early April in Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

The event took place in the historical juncture when creativity has become an imperative, when China aspires to move from a 'made in China' towards a 'created in China' country (Keane 2011), to transform creativity and culture into a crucial source for innovation and financial growth as well as part of its 'soft power' to both the citizenry as well as the outside world.

"You Must Create? Boredom, *Shanzhai* and Digitization in the Time of 'Creative China'" opened with scholarly talks and a roundtable discussion with practitioners to map out the field and major concerns of the three themes. The second day involved a site visit to the ambitious West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong, where more artists, cultural administrators and government officials joined in discussions. The final day took place in different localities of Shenzhen: Wenbo Gong, a state-promoted creative district; Dafen Village, known for its fake paintings; and New-Who Art Museum, a bottom-up art village. Young researchers also reported their findings on a diversity of topics, ranging from water calligraphy, eco-documentaries, to the aesthetics of overabundance.

"You Must Create?" was jointly organized by the Amsterdam Centre of Globalization Studies, University of Amsterdam and the Department of Humanities and Creativity Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, as part of the European Research Council funded project "From Made in China to Created in China – A Comparative Study of Creative Practice and Production in Contemporary China". The five-year project is led by Professor Jeroen de Kloet (UvA).

Explorations during the event will be organized and developed into an open source set of (audio-visual) materials, scheduled to be published by the Amsterdam University Press in the summer of 2017.

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World Forum on China Studies

20-21 November 2015, Shanghai
www.chinastudies.org.cn/english.htm

Sponsored by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China and the Shanghai Municipal Government, the World Forum on China Studies is a Shanghai-based biennial academic event jointly organized by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and the Shanghai Municipal Information Office. Founded in 2004, the Forum is held every two years in Shanghai and has convened seven times including two symposiums. The Forum has served as a platform for distinguished scholars to communicate with each other and explore the past, present and future of China studies. It is also dedicated to reflecting on the state of art in the field of China Studies while fostering an informed mutual understanding between China and the world.

The forum has established its fame internationally in academia, with the attendance of around 1600 scholars, experts and veteran politicians from over 40 countries and regions all over the world. Meanwhile, diplomatic institutions and representatives of think tanks from more than 50 countries have participated in the Forum, which received extensive coverage by dozens of professional media outlets as well. Academic circles at home and abroad speak highly of the forum; scholars from Russia, the United States, Japan, India and other countries have widely quoted the important academic points of view proposed during the forum.

Themed "China's Reform, Opportunities for the World," the 6th World Forum on China Studies was held in Shanghai on 20-21 November 2015. Over 200 scholars and opinion-leaders of different professional specialties and cultural backgrounds discussed a range of topics on China's reform in the current global setting.



that is in perpetual competition with a non-Muslim Chinese community over the limited economic resources, and has to survive in a context of social and cultural tension. Islamic education is like the soul of the community, binding all Muslims into a strong organization, regardless their social, economic, or political background.

Thirdly, the *qubba* (tomb of a Muslim scholar or elderly) forms the nexus of the Sufi community of Islamic Mysticism. More than one third of the Chinese Muslims are affiliated to one or another Sufi order. Many *qubbas* do not merely function as the burial places for the Sufi saints or Sufi leaders, but are places of pilgrimage for Sufi followers, turning them into a religious complex that combines the functions of a mosque, *maktab* and *madrasa*, and the tomb. The *qubba* thus plays a comprehensive role in the Sufi social network.

In conclusion, Chinese Muslims have strategically formed a religious, social, and cultural network that has made Islam in China an institutionalized entity binding the widely dispersed and ethnically diverse Muslim communities or enclaves into a considerably coherent, partly unified Muslim *umma*. Confronted with increasing Islamophobia in the wake of recent terrorist attacks around the world, these networks are crucial for the survival of a minority living in a country dominated by a culture of atheism and materialism.

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Above: A village mosque near Sancha Town, Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, Qinghai Province. (Aug 2011).

Below: Imam and Hui Muslims in the courtyard of Gucheng Mosque, Wuzhong City, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. (Aug 2016).
Photos by author.