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Calling a Spade A Spade in China

Laila El Baradei

American University in Cairo, lbaradei@aucegypt.edu

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Calling a Spade A Spade in China

The international community is moving more and more towards solidifying and improving its relations with China. China is a rising economic power and a massive market with unlimited opportunities. Over the past twelve months, the British Prime Minister, the President of the United States, the French President, the Russian President, the President of Egypt and many other top leaders from around the world have all visited China.

Within academia, there is also a rising interest in cooperating with China. Many American university textbooks, including the textbook I am using to teach Strategic Management in Public Organizations, are being translated to Chinese. The School of Global Affairs and Public Policy has also recently witnessed enhanced cooperation with a number of Chinese universities and has implemented short student exchange programs for the purpose of boosting students' international exposure.

Despite the ideological and cultural differences between China and Egypt, the exchange process has been very fruitful and beneficial to both parties involved. Many interesting insights were disclosed from the shared experience, and many intriguing ideas were derived from the exchanged perceptions.

In summing up the situation of Cairo traffic, one Chinese student described it as: "Chaos that works!" Another was surprised that they must pay to buy water on campus. It turned out that in most of the Chinese university campuses, there are water boilers and the students bring their own cups with them; either drink the water as is or use it for their two-minute preparation noodles, as a mainstay during their long hours of study at the library.

Within Peking University's (established formally as the first national university in 1912) Arabic language department, there were faculty and graduate students who spoke eloquently in classical Arabic. They seriously impressed the Egyptian students who have Arabic as their mother tongue, but sometimes commit serious grammatical mistakes when shifting to "Fosha" (Classical Arabic).

Most universities are public universities. It is only in the past few years that the Chinese government has started allowing for private universities to start operation, although the quality of private universities is still perceived to be quite inferior compared to the public universities. Students are characterized by a high level of commitment and hard work. It is a very competitive educational system and to get enrolled in the top universities, you have to pass through a rigorous examination and selection process. The high-power distance that exists between faculty and top administration in universities, and between students and their professors, is palpable. Obedience, respect and following orders are key values in universities.

During the visit by the Egyptians students to China, it was not at all easy to visit government organizations, as is the case with study tours to other countries. A couple of scheduled visits to China T.V. and to the Democratic Party premises were cancelled at the last minute. The Egyptian delegation was instead lectured to about the China Communist Youth League in Universities, China's Middle East Policy and the "One Belt, One Road Initiative." The Western claims that China opts to become a new global hegemony, were denied. Amongst the declared missions for the Belt Road Initiative were enabling people to people bonds and having unimpeded trade. "We are pragmatic and secular and we make friends with other countries based on interests, not ideology," was one of the opinions expressed.

Egyptian students went to China prepared for the expected ban imposed on most social media within the Chinese mainland. You cannot access Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp, except if you have downloaded previously enabling applications such as VPNs and Betternet. Before traveling to China, the Egyptian students downloaded the Chinese equivalent of WhatsApp called Wechat; an application developed by the Chinese with more than 960 million users and that the Chinese security apparatus can easily monitor. Chinese student members of the Communist party explained and justified the government's ban on social media by saying that not all citizens in China are capable of intelligently using social media and distinguishing between the fake and valid information promoted through those means. In China, they have more than twelve regulatory bodies working on censoring the media, the most powerful being the "Communist Party Propaganda Department;" perhaps an important lesson for the Egyptians — it is better to call a spade a spade.

A visit was organized to a model renovated community center where all different traditional crafts were practiced by the elderly citizens of the community, including paper cutting and holding tea parties. It was explained to us that the messy private businesses previously operated by the community members in public spaces were closed. Some of the students asked about how they managed to convince the community members to close their businesses, and to what extent there was citizen participation in deciding upon the variety of activities to be offered in the renovated community center. "Western liberal democracy was never born in this land" was a summative explanation given by one of the Chinese political science professors.