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Note: I received a Mizna Research Fellowship for four weeks of Arabic studies and service work in Morocco, during which time I wrote and published in Chinese. Afterwards, I was an Aggad Fellow for an eight-week internship in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar throughout July and August, when the country was in the middle of a diplomatic crisis with its Gulf neighbors. I continued to write during my time in Qatar, and it is impossible to present my research report without mentioning the part in Doha. Therefore, this research report will include responses from my Chinese readers to my articles published in both regions.

Bridging Two Worlds: Understanding Modern Islam through a Chinese Lens
Mizna Fellowship Research Report

“Why don’t you go back to Arabia?” “You are a fake *Han* and a disgrace to your family.” “Just another Muslim in disguise.”

In January 2017, shortly after Trump’s Muslim Ban, I woke up one morning and discovered that I had become a victim of Internet hate speech. Under an article in Chinese I posted on my website criticizing Trump’s new policy, strangers from China left me over fifty comments in less than twenty-four hours, calling me a “green”, a derogatory term in Chinese for Muslims, amongst others. At that time, my website had a little under 30,000 followers, most of whom knew me through my articles published at travel journals and magazines about my life abroad: in Bali, in Peru, in Boston. None of these 30,000 people had a problem with my lifestyle until I visited the West Bank, wrote about my conversations with Palestinian figures like Omar Barghouti, the founder of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement of Palestinian resistance, and took a stance after Trump’s ban, sympathizing with the Muslim communities.

I hadn’t been to Arabia yet and therefore had nowhere to go back to. I am a Han. And I am not a Muslim. These accusations were untrue, but they not just internet trolls. They reflected, in the most sobering fashion, the widespread and undisguised Islamophobia in China today. In June 2017, a famous Chinese actress was forced to publically take back her statement and apologize after she voiced sympathy towards the refugee crisis as an UNHCR goodwill ambassador.¹ I had spoken to journalists from Nangang city, where the residents launched a violent protest against the construction of a mosque near their neighborhood and proceeded to bury a pig’s head on the site.² A friend, a former BC student who spent a month in the Islamic province of Xinjiang on China’s northwestern border,

¹ The link leads to a Chinese article, titled “Yao Chen, You Are Worse Than a Refugee”, summarizing the actress’ PR crisis. June 27, 2017 <http://www.haijiangzx.com/2017/0627/1896838.shtml>

² “Islamophobia in China on the rise fuelled by online hate speech”, Independent UK, April 10, 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/islamophobia-china-rise-online-hate-speech-anti-muslim-islam-nangang-communist-party-government-a7676031.html>

told me that Xinjiang University would lock down its campus during Islamic holidays to prevent their Muslim students to go out and pray in the mosques. If caught, students could face immediate expulsion.

With these stories in mind, I set out to Rabat, Morocco for four weeks as a Mizna fellow. My goals were to study Arabic and to continue the series of articles I had begun in Palestine, writing to my Chinese readers about life in Morocco during Ramadan, and later, about working in Qatar.



*In the “East and West” School working with children, Rabat, Morocco
(Please do not use this photo other than for the review of my fellowship report. The teachers from the school did not wish to have the faces of the children exposed to public, as some of their parents are political refugees.)*

I lived with a Moroccan family and walked across the old medina of Rabat to Qalam wa Lawh center for Arabic classes every morning. In the afternoons, I volunteered at a local school, “East and West”, founded by two Sudanese women to help the children of Sub-Saharan African refugees to overcome the linguistic barriers and adjust to Moroccan society.³ During my volunteering, I developed a close friendship with Decca, a 26-year-old Kenyan girl in my morning Arabic class. She spoke Swahili, the language understood by these African children, and I spoke French, the official language of Morocco along with Moroccan Arabic. We worked together. Decca wore a black

³ The Basma Association for Mentally Disabled Children, the organization in my original service proposal, did not work with my schedule due to Ramadan. It was running in the evenings and I felt unsafe traveling back and forth from the association to my host family late at night. I considered “East and West” to be a viable alternative, as these children were learning Arabic simultaneously as I was, and my experience exposed me to the deep-rooted Sub-Saharan refugee issues in Morocco.

abaya to school everyday and later confessed to me that she only left Kenya to study Arabic in Morocco because her father was running for governor in the Mandera County not far from Nairobi, and as a daughter of a leading candidate, she was unsafe to live at home alone.

Decca became the muse of most of the articles I published while in Morocco. I wrote about her experience as a religious minority as only 9% of Kenyan population are Muslims, about the role of Islam to her growing up in absolute destitution, about the different ways to practice the religion in Africa and in Arabia. On weekends, we traveled together to the Sahara Desert, the Roman ruins of Volubilis, and the extraordinary mosques in Fez, Casa Blanca, Meknes and Tangier. In the Chinese language, I portrayed a Morocco through her eyes as well as mine. I strived to be truthful. So I wrote, too, about Decca's scornful denouncements of Moroccan girls as most of them wore colorful headscarves, not black *abayas*; about the racial discrimination we received at the



Decca and I in the Roman ruins of Volubilis

police station when Decca tried to prolong her visa permit as a Kenyan; about the nuances to live in an almost 100% Muslim community during Ramadan.

On July 6, an unexpected twist of event took place, as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain broke off diplomatic ties with the state of Qatar, when I was still in Morocco. The unique political situation of Qatar in the past few months sharply increased the interests to my articles from the media and from my readers. I received dozens of emails everyday asking about my safety and the reality of living in Doha under the blockade.

In this three-month process of writing about North Africa and the Gulf to a Chinese audience, I had become a personal testifier of how ignorance breeds fear and curiosity leads to understanding. Most of the Islamophobia directed towards me did not come from religious hatred, but rather, it was a result of a complete lack of religious

education in China in the past six decades⁴, fueled by ethnic differences between the secular Han majority and the minority Muslim populations- the Uyghur, Kazaks, and Hui. A dialogue was missing, and for this, I am grateful for the Mizna Fellowship for giving me an opportunity to be the person to initiate this dialogue, to translate the two otherwise incommunicable worlds to each other.

After my courses ended in Morocco, I have continued to study Arabic in Qatar with a tutor, and will continue as I return to Boston. So far, I have written in Chinese about my observations on the price of peace in Israel and Palestine (through my research trip with Professor Spangler), the different practices of Islam in North Africa (through my time working with Sub-Saharan refugee children and through the eyes of my friend Decca), and the increasing role of art and culture in the Gulf (through my internship at the Museum of Islamic Art). The bridge between the Middle East and China had never been broken since the beginning of the Silk Road. I look forward to deepen my understanding and narrow my research in the next three years at Boston College.

⁴ Zhou, Viola. "When Are You Going Back to Arabia: How Chinese Muslims Became the Target of Online Hate", *South China Morning Post*. March 12, 2017 <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2052460/when-are-you-going-back-arabia-how-chinese-muslims-became-target>