

LETTER FROM EGYPT
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LEARNING TO SPEAK LINGERIE

Chinese merchants and the inroads of globalization.

BY PETER HESSLER

Chen Yaying and Liu Jun, who go by the names Kiki and John, in their lingerie store in Asyut, with their Egyptian assistant Rahma Medhat.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RENA EFFENDI / INSTITUTE

The city of Asyut sits in the heart of Upper Egypt, at a crescent-shaped bend in the Nile River, where the western bank is home to a university, a train station, approximately four hundred thousand people, and three shops in which Chinese migrants sell racy lingerie to locals. These shops are not hard to find. The first time I visited Asyut, I hailed a cab at the entrance of the city and asked the driver if he knew of any Chinese people in town. Without hesitation, he drove along the Nile Corniche, turned through a series of alleyways, and pointed to a sign that said, in Arabic, “Chinese Lingerie.” The two other shops, China Star and Noma China, are less than a block away. All three are owned by natives of Zhejiang province, in southeastern China, and they sell similar products, many of which are inexpensive, garishly colored, and profoundly impractical. There are buttless body stockings, and nightgowns that cover only one breast, and G-strings accessorized with feathers. There are see-through tops decorated with plastic gold coins that dangle from chains. Brand names include Laugh Girl, Shady Tex Lingerie, Hot Love Italy Design, and Sexy Fashion Reticulation Alluring.



Upper Egypt is the most conservative part of the country. Virtually all Muslim women there wear the head scarf, and it's not uncommon for them to dress in the niqab, the black garment that covers everything but the eyes. In most towns, there's no tourism to speak of, and very little industry; Asyut is the poorest governorate in Egypt. Apart from small groups of Syrians who occasionally pass through in travelling market fairs, it's all but unimaginable for a foreigner to do business there. And yet I found Chinese lingerie dealers scattered throughout the region. In Beni Suef, at an open-air market called the Syrian Fair, two Chinese underwear salesmen had somehow embedded with the Syrians who were hawking cheap clothes and trinkets. Minya, the next city to the south, had a Chinese Lingerie Corner in a mall whose entrance featured a Koranic verse that warned

against jealousy. In the remote town of Mallawi, a Chinese husband and wife were selling thongs and nightgowns across the street from the ruins of the Mallawi Museum, which, not long before the Chinese arrived, had been looted and set afire by a mob of Islamists.

All told, along a three-hundred-mile stretch, I found twenty-six Chinese lingerie dealers: four in Sohag, twelve in Asyut, two in Mallawi, six in Minya, and two in Beni Suef. It was like mapping the territory of large predator cats: in the Nile Valley, clusters of Chinese lingerie dealers tend to appear at intervals of thirty to fifty miles, and the size of each cluster varies according to the local population. Cairo is big enough to support dozens. Dong Weiping, a businessman who owns a lingerie factory in the capital, told me that he has more than forty relatives in Egypt, all of them selling his products. Other Chinese people supply the countless underwear shops that are run by Egyptians. For the Chinese dealers, this is their window into Egypt, and they live on lingerie time. Days start late, and nights run long; they ignore the Spring Festival and sell briskly after sundown during Ramadan. Winter is better than summer. Mother's Day is made for lingerie. But nothing compares with Valentine's Day, so this year I celebrated the holiday by saying goodbye to my wife, driving four hours to Asyut, and watching people buy underwear at the China Star shop until almost midnight.

China Star is situated next to the Ibn al-Khattab Mosque, and not long before the first call sounded for sunset prayer a sheikh arrived at the shop. He was tall and fat, with strong, dark features, and he wore a brilliant blue galabiya, a carefully wrapped turban, and a pair of heavy silk scarves. He was followed by two large women in niqabs. The sheikh planted himself at the entrance of the shop while the women searched purposefully through the racks and the rows of mannequins. Periodically, one of them would hold up an item, and the sheikh would register his opinion with a wave of his hand.

Valentine's Day is one of the few times of the year when most China Star customers are male. Usually, it's only women in the shop, and often they buy the lightweight, form-fitting dresses that Chinese dealers refer to as *suiyi*, or "casual clothes." No Upper Egyptian woman would wear such garments in public, but it's acceptable at home. This is one reason that the market for clothing is so profitable: Egyptian women need two separate wardrobes, for their public and their private lives. Usually, they also acquire a third line of clothing, which is designed to be sexy. The two women in niqabs quickly found two items that the sheikh approved of: matching sets of thongs and skimpy, transparent nightgowns, one in red and the other in blue.

The sheikh began to bargain with Chen Yaying, who runs the shop with her husband, Liu Jun. In Egypt, they go by the names Kiki and John, and both are tiny—Kiki barely reached the sheikh's chest. She's twenty-four years old but could pass for a bookish teenager; she wears rectangular glasses and a loose ponytail. "This is Chinese!" she said, in

heavily accented Arabic, holding up the garments. “Good quality!” She dropped the total price to a hundred and sixty pounds, a little more than twenty dollars, but the sheikh offered one-fifty.

“Leave the bottle.”

It was still unclear what his relationship was with the two women in niqabs. When we chatted, he said that he monitors mosques for the Ministry of Religious Endowments. He wasn’t bothered when I mentioned Valentine’s Day—some devout Muslims believe that the holiday should not be celebrated. But I couldn’t find a tactful way to learn more about the women. In Upper Egypt, it’s not appropriate to ask a man too directly about his wife, especially if she’s wearing a niqab. Whenever I’ve got to know a man whose wife wears the garment, he usually explains that it’s supposed to prevent other men from thinking about her. For a Westerner, though, it often has the opposite effect. I can’t pick up basic information—how old somebody is, what expression she has on her face—and inevitably my imagination starts to fill in the gaps. Were both these women the sheikh’s wives? Was one to be dressed in red, and the other in blue, for Valentine’s Day?



The sheikh and Kiki were still separated by ten pounds when the second call to prayer sounded. “I have to go,” he said, and handed Kiki his money. “I’m a sheikh! I have to pray.” But Kiki slapped him lightly on the arm with the cash. “Ten more!” she said sternly. The sheikh’s eyes widened in mock surprise, and then, with a flourish, he turned to face Mecca, closed his eyes, and held out his hands in the posture of prayer. Standing in the middle of the lingerie shop, he began to recite, “*Subhan’allah wal’hamdulillah . . .*”

“Fine, fine!” Kiki said, and rushed off to deal with other customers. The sheikh smiled as he left, the women trailing behind him. Later in the evening, Kiki told me that she thought one of the women was the sheikh’s mother. From my perspective, this changed the narrative significantly but didn’t make it any less interesting. Kiki, though, had nothing more to say about it: as far as she was concerned, the story had ended the moment the sale was made.

Chinese dealers rarely speculate about their Egyptian customers, even the ones they see frequently. Kiki told me that some local women visit two or three times a month, and they acquire more than a hundred sets of the nightgowns and panties, so China Star changes its stock every two months. When I pressed the Chinese to analyze the demand, they often said that it’s because Egyptian men like sex, and because there are so many restrictions on public attire. “If you never have a chance to look nice, it’s hard

on you, psychologically,” Chen Huantai, another dealer in Asyut, told me. “And they have to wear so many clothes when they’re outside, so they have these other things to look prettier at home.”

But on the whole this subject doesn’t interest Chinese dealers. Few of them are well educated, and they don’t perceive themselves as being engaged in a cultural exchange. On issues of religion, they are truly agnostic: they seem to have no preconceptions or received ideas, and they evaluate any faith strictly on the basis of direct personal experience. “The ones with the crosses—are they Muslim?” one Chinese dealer asked me. He had been living for four years in Minya, a town with sectarian strife so serious that several Coptic Christian churches had been damaged by mobs armed with Molotov cocktails. During one of our conversations, I realized that he was under the impression that women who wear head scarves are adherents of a different religion from that of those who wear the niqab. It was logical: he noticed contrasts in dress and behavior, and so he assumed that they believe in different things; a monolithic label like “Islam” meant nothing to him. In general, Chinese dealers prefer Egyptian Muslims to Christians. This is partly because Muslims are more faithful consumers of lingerie, but it’s also because they’re easier to negotiate with. The Copts are a financially successful minority, and they have a reputation for bargaining aggressively. This is what matters most to Chinese dealers—for them, religion is essentially another business proposition.

Initially, I wondered how the lingerie dealers can succeed despite having so little curiosity about their larger cultural environment. The poorest place in which I found any Chinese was Mallawi, where a dealer named Ye Da invited me to his decrepit apartment for lunch, only to discover that he had bought camel meat by mistake at the butcher’s. He and his wife had moved to Mallawi shortly after it experienced some of the worst political violence in Upper Egypt, in August, 2013, when riots resulted in eighteen deaths. The couple’s home contained a single book, which was subtitled, in Chinese, “You Are Your Own Best Doctor.” They spoke almost no Arabic or English. They didn’t have a Chinese-Arabic dictionary, phrasebook, or language textbook—in fact, I’ve never met a lingerie dealer who owns any of these things. Unlike Mandarin, Arabic is inflected for gender, and Chinese dealers, who learn the language strictly by ear, often pick up speech patterns from female customers. I’ve come to think of it as the lingerie dialect, and there’s something disarming about these Chinese men speaking in the feminine voice.

In the lingerie dialect, one important phrase is “I have this in a wider size.” Chinese dealers use this phrase a lot. Egyptians tend to be big, and they’re often good-humored and charismatic, like the sheikh in *China Star*. In contrast, the diminutive, more serious Chinese have a way of receding from the center of a scene. These differences seem perfectly matched for the exchange of lingerie. The Chinese dealers are small, and they know little, and they care even less—all of these qualities help put Egyptian customers at ease.

“Want to know how many steps we took?”



The shops often employ young local women as assistants, who in many cases can barely communicate with their bosses. Nevertheless, these women tend to be fiercely loyal to the Chinese. In Upper Egypt, it's unusual for a woman to work, and a few of the assistants seem to be engaged in acts of rebellion. At China Star, Kiki and John are currently assisted by an eighteen-year-old named Rahma Medhat, who wears the head scarf but also has tattoos on both hands, including one of a skull and crossbones. She had this done at a Coptic church. In Egypt, Christians traditionally have a cross tattooed onto their right hand or wrist, and the church is often the only place in town with a tattoo gun. For a Muslim, it makes the act of getting a tattoo even more outrageous—Rahma told me, with evident satisfaction, that her parents had been furious. They had also opposed her working in the lingerie shop, where she had replaced another young woman who had had family problems of her own. John told me that he had never fully understood the situation, but he had noticed bruises on the young woman's face and arms, and one day her father came and beat her on the sidewalk in front of China Star.

Most assistants, though, have been driven to work because of difficult economic circumstances. At the Chinese Lingerie Corner, in Minya, a twenty-seven-year-old woman named Rasha Abdel Rahman told me that she had started working almost a decade ago, after her mother died and her father was crippled in an auto accident. Rasha has four sisters, and she's been able to earn the money necessary to help three of them get married. In the past, she worked for another Chinese dealer, and she told me that she would never accept employment from an Egyptian. In her opinion, the Chinese are direct and honest, and she appreciates their remove from local gossip networks. “They keep their secrets,” she said.

Rasha told me that local men can't sell lingerie as effectively as Chinese men. “I can't describe how they do it,” she said, speaking through a translator. “But they can look at the item and give it to the woman, and that's it. An Egyptian man would look at the item, and then look at the woman, and then he might make a joke or laugh about it.” Rasha spoke of her previous Chinese boss fondly. “He didn't have anything in mind while he was selling,” she said. “When you buy something, you feel the thoughts of the person selling it. And with the Chinese their brains don't go thinking about women's bodies.”

The most important word in the lingerie dialect is *arusa*, or “bride.” The Chinese pronounce it *alusa*, and they use it constantly; in many Cairo neighborhoods, there are Chinese who go door-to-door with sacks of dresses and underwear, calling out

“*Alusa! Alusa!*” In Chinese shops, owners use it as a form of address for any potential customer. To locals, it sounds flattering and a little funny: “Beautiful blide! Look at this, blide! What do you want, blide?”

On Valentine’s Day, not long after the sheikh left, a genuine *arusa* walked into China Star. She was nineteen years old, and the wedding was scheduled for later in the year. The *arusa* was accompanied by her fiancé, her mother, and her sixteen-year-old brother. Kiki began picking items off the racks. “*Alusa*, do you want this?” she said, producing a box labelled “Net Ladystocking Spring Butterfly.” First, the *arusa* studied the Ladystocking, which was then passed to the fiancé, then to the mother, and finally to the younger brother. The box featured two photographs, front and rear, of a Slavic-looking model who stood beside a bookshelf of leather-bound volumes in high heels, a neck-to-ankle lace bodysuit, a G-string, and a vacant expression. The brother studied the box for a long time. It went into a pile for approved items.

In an Egyptian marriage, the groom is expected to buy an apartment and furniture, while the *arusa* acquires small appliances, kitchenware, and clothing, including lingerie. The market has boomed since 2009, when a trade agreement with China made it easier to import clothes, and lingerie shops suddenly became more prominent in Egyptian cities. Dong Weiping, one of the biggest dealers in Cairo, told me that he imports ten shipping containers of women’s underwear every year, in addition to the items that he makes in his Egyptian factory. At China Star, the *arusa* and her family spent more than an hour picking out twenty-five nightgown-and-panty sets, ten pairs of underwear, ten brassieres, and one Ladystocking. The mother paid the equivalent of three hundred and sixty dollars, and she told me that they planned to make two or three more shopping trips before the wedding. At one point, the group broke into spontaneous applause when Kiki produced a nightgown. “What do you think?” she said, holding up another transparent top with a pink G-string. “*W’allaby, laziz!*” the fiancé said. “By God, it’s beautiful!” He worked as a lawyer in Asyut, and the *arusa* studied law at the university. She was well spoken and pretty, although she wore shapeless jeans and a heavy green coat. Her head scarf was wrapped tightly under the chin in a conservative style.

They impressed me as a traditional, provincial middle-class family, and nothing seemed awkward about this shopping expedition. If anything, the mood was innocent and joyous, and the *arusa* didn’t appear the least bit embarrassed. I was certain that even the most self-confident American woman would be mortified by the idea of shopping for lingerie with her fiancé, her mother, and her teen-age brother, not to mention doing this in the presence of two Chinese shop owners, their assistant, and a foreign journalist. But I had witnessed similar scenes at other shops in Upper Egypt, where an *arusa* is almost always accompanied by family members or friends, and the ritual seems largely disconnected from sex in people’s minds.

And there's something about the status of an *arusa* that demands an audience. Chinese dealers sometimes tell me that Egyptian women buy this stuff because they dance for their husbands at night, a theory that I suspect has more to do with movie images of belly dancing than it does with actual behavior. But it may be true in a more figurative sense. Whenever I see an *arusa* shopping for lingerie with friends or family, I have the feeling that the woman is on display, and preparing for a future role. At China Star, I asked the mother if her daughter would work as a lawyer after the wedding. "Of course not!" she said. "She'll stay at home." She spoke proudly, the same way that I often hear Egyptian men tell me that their wives spend their days in the house. In Egyptian Arabic, another meaning of *arusa* is "doll"—children use this word for the toys that they dress and undress.



In Asyut, the small Chinese community was pioneered by Kiki's parents, Lin Xianfei and Chen Caimei. Lin grew up on a half-acre farm in Zhejiang, where poverty forced him to leave school after the fifth grade. In the nineteen-nineties, he found modest success as a small-time trader of clothes in Beijing, and then, in 2001, he heard that some people from his home town had gone to Egypt to seek their fortunes. He studied a map and decided that he would settle in Asyut, because he believed it to be the most populous city in Upper Egypt. (In fact, Luxor is bigger.)

"I knew I'd be the only Chinese person there, so the opportunity would be better," Lin told me. In Asyut, he set up a stall in a *ma'rad*, a kind of open-air market, and initially he sold three products that he had carried in his luggage: neckties, pearls, and underwear. He didn't worry about whether Upper Egyptians actually wanted these things—the key factor was size. "They were easy to pack in a suitcase," he explained.

Lin quickly realized that people in Asyut cared little for pearls and they did not wear neckties with galabiya. But they liked women's underwear, so he began to specialize, and soon his wife came over from China to help. In Cairo and northern Egypt, the network of Chinese lingerie importers and producers quickly grew, and eventually Lin and Chen rented a storefront in Asyut. They invited a relative and a friend to open the two other shops in town. While Lin and Chen were building their small lingerie empire, they noticed that there was a lot of garbage sitting in open piles around Asyut. They were not the first people to make this observation. But they were the first to respond by importing a polyethylene-terephthalate bottle-flake washing production line, which is manufactured in Jiangsu province, and which allows an entrepreneur to grind up plastic bottles, wash and dry the regrind at high temperatures, and sell it as recycled material.

“I saw that it was just lying around, so I decided that I could recycle it and make money,” Lin told me. He and his wife had no experience in the industry, but in 2007 they established the first plastic-bottle recycling facility in Upper Egypt. Their plant is in a small industrial zone in the desert west of Asyut, where it currently employs thirty people and grinds up about four tons of plastic every day. Lin and Chen sell the processed material to Chinese people in Cairo, who use it to manufacture thread. This thread is then sold to entrepreneurs in the Egyptian garment industry, including a number of Chinese. It’s possible that a bottle tossed onto the side of the road in Asyut will pass through three stages of Chinese processing before returning to town in the form of lingerie, also to be sold by Chinese.

Lin told me that the factory makes between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand dollars a year in profits, and this success inspired an Egyptian businessman in Asyut to poach some of Lin’s technicians and open a second recycling plant, earlier this year. Nevertheless, Lin and Chen’s business continues to thrive, although they still live in a bare apartment above the factory floor, amid the roar of machinery. Lin is in his early fifties and looks a decade older, with the tired eyes and troubled stomach of a Chinese businessman who has shared a lot of heavy meals and drink with associates. He rarely says much about local culture, but once, when I asked casually what he considered to be the biggest problem in Egypt, the forcefulness of his response surprised me.

“Inequality between men and women,” he said immediately. “Here the women just stay home and sleep. If they want to develop, the first thing they need to do is solve this problem. That’s what China did after the revolution. It’s a waste of talent here. Look at my family—you see how my wife works. We couldn’t have the factory without her. And my daughter runs the shop. If they were Egyptian, they wouldn’t be doing that.”

A couple of months later, when I made another visit to Asyut, Chen was running the plant because her husband had travelled to China to see doctors about his stomach. One afternoon, I stood at the factory gate while two young men from a nearby village delivered a truckload of plastic bottles in huge burlap sacks. One of the men was named Omar, and he told me that he had started scavenging five years ago, at the age of twelve, because the Chinese had opened the factory. Now he partners with a truck owner to haul the plastic, and they subcontract to local children who collect bottles on their behalf. Omar said that he usually earns at least a hundred pounds a day—around thirteen dollars—which is double the local day wage for a laborer. While we were talking, Chen burst out of the factory gate. She wore a flowered apron that said “My Playmate,” and her face was a picture of pure rage.

“Why are you bringing water?” she screamed. She hurled a couple of one-litre bottles at Omar and his companion, who scurried behind the truck. “You’re bad!” she shouted, in broken Arabic. “Ali Baba, you Ali Baba! I’m angry, angry, angry! This isn’t clean! Not clean!”

“Will he know what this is about?”

Chen had discovered the full bottles at the bottom of a sack of empties: the recyclers were trying to tip the scales. She kept screaming—*you Ali Baba!*—and finally I understood that she was referring to the forty thieves of “The Arabian Nights.” I had never heard anybody in Egypt use “Ali Baba” in this way, but it’s part of Chen’s own recycling dialect. Omar stayed out of range until she stalked back inside the gate.



“By God, I hope a car hits her!” Omar said. “She threw bricks at us once.”

A factory foreman named Mohammed Abdul Rahim said something to the effect that Omar deserved to be pelted with whatever he hid in the bottom of his sacks.

“I’m not the one doing this!” Omar said. “The little kids do it—the kids who collect the bottles.”

“He knows what he’s doing,” Mohammed said to me. He explained that invariably some foreign object was hidden in the sacks, and just as invariably Chen or Lin discovered it. After a while, Chen reappeared in the “My Playmate” apron to engage in another round of Ali Baba abuse, and then she finally sat down and negotiated heatedly with the bottle collectors for a price per kilo. The total for the truckload came to eight hundred and one pounds, a little more than a hundred dollars. When Omar’s partner insisted on receiving the last pound, Chen slammed the coin on the table like a rejected mah-jongg tile. The young man made a show of searching through the bills to find a fifty that he claimed was too tattered to accept.

“Muslim money!” Chen shouted, but she replaced it. The moment the bottle collectors were gone, her anger evaporated—here at the factory, she seemed to have adapted to a certain Egyptian theatrical quality. She wore her hair pulled back in a bun, and she had the broad, weathered face of a peasant, as well as the reflexive modesty. Once, when I mentioned that she had been brave to move to a place like Asyut, she brushed aside the compliment and said that she was simply ignorant. “I can’t read,” she said. “I can write my name, but it looks awful. I didn’t go to school at all, not for one day.”

On Fridays, when the plant closes for the weekend, Chen and Lin drive into Asyut and spend time with Kiki and John, who have a two-year-old daughter. Once, I was in town when the child was suffering from a nasty-looking abscess on her eyelid, and John asked

me to accompany them to a nearby hospital, to help translate. The doctor's diagnosis was an infection, and he said that it had probably developed because of unclean conditions. John remarked that this was the first time that his daughter had seen a doctor since she was born. Nobody in the family seems intimidated by life in Asyut, and they don't consider themselves successful; Chen and Lin often say that their factory is just a low-level industry. But, whenever I visit, I can't help thinking: Here in Egypt, home to eighty-five million people, where Western development workers and billions of dollars of foreign aid have poured in for decades, the first plastic-recycling center in the south is a thriving business that employs thirty people, reimburses others for reducing landfill waste, and earns a significant profit. So why was it established by two lingerie-fuelled Chinese migrants, one of them illiterate and the other with a fifth-grade education?

I've never met Chinese people in Egypt who express an interest in changing the country. They often talk about what they perceive to be weaknesses—a lack of work ethic among the people, a lack of system in the government—but the tone is different from that of many Westerners. There's little frustration; the Chinese seem to accept that this is simply the way things are. There's also no guilt, because China has no colonial history in the region, and its government engages with both Israel and Palestine. Chinese entrepreneurs often speak fondly of the friendliness of Egyptians and their willingness to help strangers, two qualities that the Chinese believe to be rare in their own country. They almost never seem disappointed by the Egyptian revolution. This is not because they believe that the Arab Spring has turned out well but because they had no faith in it in the first place.

In 2012, when Mohamed Morsi was elected President after the revolution, his first state visit was to China. The following year, he was removed in a military coup, and his successor, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, also quickly made a trip to China. There's no indication that the abrupt change in leadership disturbed the Chinese government. One evening in Cairo, I met with a diplomat from another Asian country and described my experiences with Chinese lingerie dealers in Upper Egypt. She said that their behavior and outlook reminded her of what she observed as a diplomat. "The Chinese will sell people anything they like," she said. "They don't ask any questions. They don't care what you do with what they sell you. They won't ask whether the Egyptians are going to hold elections, or repress people, or throw journalists into jail. They don't care." She continued, "The Americans think, If everybody is like me, they're less likely to attack me. The Chinese don't think like that. They don't try to make the world be like them." She continued, "Their strategy is to make economic linkages, so if you break these economic linkages it's going to hurt you as much as it hurts them."

"I'm looking for something that will keep people away from me on the subway."

NOVEMBER 8, 2004

For the past twenty years, China has created such connections throughout Africa. In “China’s Second Continent,” published in 2014, Howard French estimates that a million Chinese live on the continent, and China does more than twice as much trade with Africa as the United States does. French observes that in many places the Chinese are essentially stepping into old colonial patterns of resource extraction, which causes resentment among



locals. But in Egypt the terms are different. The country has few natural resources that the Chinese need: last year, Egyptian exports to China were roughly a tenth the value of Chinese imports, and the trade gap is widening. Direct investment is low—China is only the twentieth-largest investor in Egypt, and the number of Chinese in the country is estimated to be around ten thousand. Nevertheless, Egypt plays a disproportionately large political role in the Middle East, which provides China with half its oil, and much Chinese trade to Europe passes through the Suez Canal. In addition, Egyptian universities are home to approximately two thousand Chinese students, most of them Muslim. The Chinese government is concerned that these students will acquire radical religious ideas, which is another reason that they feel they have a stake in Egypt’s stability and prosperity.

And so Chinese statecraft in Egypt calls for something more strategic and principled than simple economic pragmatism. China is currently doubling the size of its Cairo Embassy, and officials realize that the failure of U.S. policies in the Middle East creates an opportunity for China to increase its stature. But the process of identifying values and goals in the abstract doesn’t seem to come naturally to the Chinese government. “To be honest, I think that even within China they don’t know what kind of ideology they’re going after,” the Asian diplomat told me. Even if the Chinese had some idea that they want to promote, they lack the soft-power tools of neighbors like Japan and South Korea, which fund development work in ways similar to those of Western governments. In Cairo, the Chinese have set up a Confucius Institute, which is supposed to advance Chinese language and values, but the scale is modest, and Egyptian religious authorities tend to be resistant to such endeavors.

Without a clear strategy, China has turned to a basic instinct of the Deng Xiaoping era: When in doubt, build factories. At a place in the desert called Ain Sokhna, not far from where the Red Sea meets the Suez Canal, a Chinese state-owned company called TEDA has constructed the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone. The motto is “Cooperation Makes the World Better,” and the zone consists of six square kilometres of virgin desert that have been carved into a grid of straight, wide streets. It’s surrounded by wasteland—the nearest city of any size is Suez, an hour away—but the zone has a Tianjin Road, a Chongqing Road, and a Shanghai Road. Worker dormitories have been constructed, along with yards for piling up empty

shipping containers, whose bright colors are visible for miles across the desert, like stacks of Legos melting in the sun. There's one Chinese restaurant, one Chinese market, and one Chinese barber. The Chinese tend to be fastidious about hair, and wherever migrants gather, even in the desert near the Red Sea, a barber is sure to materialize.

The TEDA zone looks as if it could have been uprooted from almost any small Chinese city. Such transplants are springing up all around the world: earlier this year, the government announced that it plans to build a hundred and eighteen economic zones in fifty countries. The Chinese want to encourage domestic industry to move abroad, in part as a way of dealing with diminishing natural resources in China. The TEDA zone offers subsidized rent and utilities to entrepreneurs, and more than fifty companies have become tenants. The majority are Chinese, and they tend to be small; a couple are owned by former lingerie dealers. But almost every Chinese boss whom I talked to complained about the same problem: they can't find good workers, especially good female workers.

"I just can't hire men," Xu Xin, who had started a cell-phone factory, told me bluntly. After many years with Motorola in China, Xu had come to Egypt in the hope of producing inexpensive phones for the local market. "This work requires discipline," he said. "A cell phone has more than a hundred parts, and, if you make one mistake, then the whole thing doesn't work. The men here in Egypt are too restless; they like to move around. They can't focus." He had wanted to hire women, but he quickly discovered that he was limited to those who are unmarried. Turnover was high: most workers quit whenever they got engaged or married. Even worse, Xu discovered that young Egyptian women can't live in dormitories, because it's considered inappropriate to be away from their parents at night. Female employees have to be bused in and out of Suez, which adds more than three hours to the workday. This prevented Xu from running multiple shifts on his assembly lines, and after a year he shut down the plant.

Others are struggling with the same problem. I met Wang Weiqiang, who had built a profitable business in eastern China producing the white *ghotra* head coverings worn by Saudis and other Gulf Arabs. After more than a decade, Wang decided to start an operation in Egypt. "I have very good-quality Egyptian cotton here," he said. "My machinery is very modern. My investment is more than a million dollars for the factory here. But during these two years I've lost a lot. It's all the problem of labor—the mentality of the workers. Our factory needs to run twenty-four hours a day; it's not just for one shift. In order to do this in Egypt, we have to hire male workers, and the men are really lazy." He continued, "Now I reject ninety per cent of the men who apply. I use only girls and women. They are very good workers. But the problem is that they will work only during the daytime." He intends to introduce greater mechanization in hopes of maximizing the short workday. "It drives me crazy," he said.

"Did you pay the gravity bill?"

NOVEMBER 29, 2004

More than two decades ago, at the start of the economic boom in China, bosses hired young women because they could be paid less and controlled more easily than men. But it soon became clear that, in a society that traditionally had undervalued women, they were more motivated, and over the years their role and reputation began to change. Nowadays, there's still a significant gender gap at the upper levels—women are badly underrepresented on Chinese corporate boards and powerful government bodies. But among the working classes women have a great deal of economic clout, and it's common to meet rural Chinese who say that they prefer to have daughters, a sentiment that was rare in the past.



Egypt also has the kind of disparity that can motivate women to work harder than men, but traditions are much more deeply entrenched. In December, 2013, TEDA announced that it would almost double the size of the development zone, but it's hard to imagine who will fill all that space, since only a sixth of the current area is occupied. In the meantime, the place feels lifeless, without the hum of a real Chinese factory town. It's especially dead in the evening—no sounds of night-shift machinery, no packs of laughing young workers in uniform. Along the edges of the industrial park, the sand drifts across empty streets; on one road, I counted two hundred and thirty-two street lights that weren't working. Egypt is full of grandiose and misguided projects in the desert, both ancient and modern, and TEDA is one of the strangest: a lost Chinese factory town in the Sahara, where Ozymandian dreams have been foiled by a simple failure to get women out of their homes.

At Ain Sokhna, I got to know a young boss named Wu Zhicheng, who produces inexpensive plastic dishware for the Egyptian market. He employs about twenty women on his assembly line, although the turnover is high—usually, workers stay for only a few months before they get engaged or married. In the past, Wu managed factories in China, where he observed that young rural women often come to work out of a vague desire to get away from their families and villages. After taking that first step, they enter new communities in factories and dormitories, where their ideas might mature into a more coherent desire to be independent and successful. But Wu said that the starting point for Egyptian women workers is different. “They aren't trying to escape something, like the girls in China,” he told me. “Here they're doing it just for the money.”

A number of Wu's factory workers are saving money specifically so that they can buy things like lingerie and enter a traditional marriage. “I'm supposed to get married this year,” Soad Abdel Hamid, a twenty-four-year-old who operates a plastic press on the assembly line, told me. “But it seems that I won't, because I haven't finished buying my

stuff.” She said that marriages often get delayed or even broken off if somebody can’t purchase the expected objects. She plans to quit work after she marries, which is true of every employee I talked to, except for two.

Even these two exceptions can’t be considered opponents of traditional values. One is a woman in her fifties named Fatma Mohammed Mahmoud, who is the only married woman in the factory. She told me that for years she’s wanted to get divorced, but her husband, who refuses to support her financially, will not agree to end the marriage. Since 2000, Egyptian women have had the right to initiate divorce, but Fatma has decided against it. “My siblings tell me not to, because for our traditions it’s considered bad,” she said. “We’re from Upper Egypt. The minds are closed.” Fatma has only one co-worker who also insists that she will continue to work after marriage, a young woman named Esma. Previously, she had a better job, handling inventory at a factory near her home in Suez, where her fiancé was also employed. But they broke up, and Esma’s father forced her to quit the job because it’s inappropriate for a young woman to work in the same place as her ex-fiancé. “As Egyptians, when your parents give you an order, you have to follow it,” she told me. So now she rides a bus for four hours a day in order to work a job with less pay and less potential.

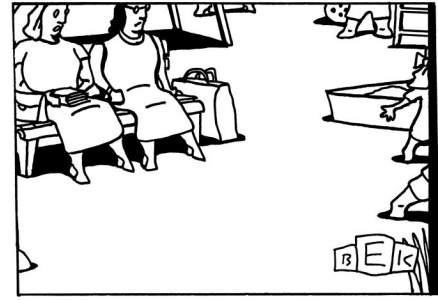
Wu’s conclusion about Egyptian women workers is simple: as long as they lack a basic desire to escape the familiar, it’s unlikely that they will change anything fundamental about their lives. He sees Egypt in similar terms. “It would have been better if they hadn’t removed Mubarak,” he told me. I often hear such comments from Chinese entrepreneurs, and to a Westerner they sound cynical, because the assumption is that any outsider wants to see Egypt reformed.

But in certain ways the perspective of the Chinese may be clearer, because they see Egypt for what it is, not for what they hope it might become. During the revolution of 2011, Westerners usually believed that they were witnessing the rise of a powerful social movement, whereas the Chinese in Egypt tended to perceive the collapse of a weak state. For Chinese entrepreneurs, the contact is so local and pragmatic that they aren’t obsessed with national political movements or religious trends. They rarely talk about politics or the Muslim Brotherhood, but the issue of women’s status often comes up, because it profoundly affects any activity in Egypt. Some Chinese, like the lingerie dealers, have found clever ways to profit from the gender issue, while other entrepreneurs have struggled because their factory zone was planned without consideration of this basic feature of Egyptian society. And, from the Chinese perspective, the fundamental issue in Egypt is not politics, or religion, or militarism—it’s family. Husbands and wives, parents and children: in Egypt, these relationships haven’t been changed at all by the Arab Spring, and until that happens there is no point in talking about a revolution.

“They grow up so slow.”

SEPTEMBER 2, 2002

At the end of last year, the Chinese suddenly decided to build four amusement parks in the factory zone. Across the street from the International Drilling Material Manufacturing Co., Ltd., which makes pipes, TEDA constructed something called Dinosaur World. It features large electric-powered models of creatures like Tyrannosaurus and Allosaurus, although the prehistoric theme has been stretched to include some anachronisms: a pirate-ship ride, a spaceship ride, and a Skyride, which is decorated with happy frogs. A couple of entrepreneurs in the zone told me they suspected that somebody in the Chinese amusement industry was dumping over-produced goods. No TEDA official would speak to me on the record, but one employee explained that the company wants to generate publicity that will make it easier to attract factory workers. “This way, people will come for the park, and while they’re here they’ll learn about the development zone,” he said, hopefully.



On the last weekend in March, TEDA invited everybody in the zone to attend a free test run of the amusement parks. It was a hot, windy day, and sand in the air kept most people away from Water World, which has been built next to some half-empty worker dorms. The other two parks are Candy World and Auto World, whose go-karts and bumper cars were particularly popular with the factory bosses. There was Wu Zhicheng, who manufactures plastic dishware, and Wang Weiqiang, who makes head coverings for Saudis, and Zhang Binghua, who once sold lingerie and now produces thread. A dozen high-ranking TEDA officials also showed up, all of them in dark suits, their knees cramped against the steering wheels of the child-size vehicles. Many of these cadres had flown in from Tianjin. The Chinese rammed each other in bumper cars and spun around the go-kart track, and then they got back in line and did it again. The interior of Auto World had been remodelled so successfully that there was no sign that this two-story building once housed the cell-phone factory that went out of business for lack of female workers. Across the street, all the electric dinosaurs came to life. They opened their jaws, and roared through tinny speakers, and moved their limbs spasmodically, as if shocked to find themselves in the middle of the desert. ♦



Peter Hessler joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2000.

