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Debates about “cleaning the ‘foreign garbage’” in China – Where has the people-to-people friendship gone?

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The lack of official response to the recent rant of a news anchor man of Chinese television, calling on Chinese to “clean the ‘foreign garbage’”, is disconcerting. CCS research fellow Dr Daouda Cissé reports back from Eastern China, where he is currently spending time for fieldwork. He is back in China for the first time in a year, after having lived there for five years previously. Considering the sharp rise of China’s prominence, it is not surprising that a lot of things have changed economically with new buildings and infrastructure everywhere. However, economic change does not mean political opening. While the ‘Middle Kingdom’ is increasingly engaging with the world, this does not mean that ‘official China’ welcomes foreigners with open arms, as Dr Cissé reports.

The mood in China has turned against foreigners, after a Briton and a Russian drew bad media coverage in recent weeks, one for molestation of Chinese women, the other for rudeness. Subsequently, Yang Rui, a well-known Chinese TV news anchor man who (ironically) appears on the English language programming at CCTV, called for “cleaning the ‘foreign garbage’”. This passed without any noticeable high-level response and the journalist is still working in his position. On the other hand, official checks and controls are becoming more frequent, and target obvious foreigners in China. Black Africans are often targets of official policies, irrespective of official friendship statements. The pattern looks familiar. During the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, foreigners frequently had to show their passport for visa checks and black Africans were not allowed to enter certain areas or places of the city, even though they were staying in the country legally. This was also the case in Guangzhou during the 2010 Asia Games; many foreigners decided to leave the city because the atmosphere was deemed unbearable. In fact, such scenarios are recurrent in Guangzhou, a southern Chinese city that has one quarter of town dubbed “Chocolate city” because of the skin colour of the relatively numerous African population there. Here again, Beijing seems to have decided to track illegal foreign immigrants who overstayed their visa or who are illegally working in the country.

Personal encounters with ‘official China’

Having landed at Beijing international airport, I spent a few minutes in front of an immigration officer who carefully scrutinized my passport, checked again and again my personal data on the first page and the picture. She then went to my recent Chinese visa page and did the same. I waited patiently - and eventually got my passport back. After this, customs was the next step. A customs officer asked for my passport in Chinese. I wanted to know what he needed it for and his simple answer of “needing to check” made me start an argument with him. I wanted to know why – of all the passengers that had passed through – he picked me? I was the only one he stopped to claim the passport and even the ticket. How would I have come all the way from South Africa to China without a ticket? I left him standing at his position, probably surprised by my reaction and my mandarin skills.

In China, the hotels work closely with the immigration officers to expose foreigners who do not have residence permits. Currently, I am based in Jinhua, a university town in Zhejiang province. Today, while leaving for the city centre, I found five policemen at my hotel's reception talking to the managers. When I got back to the hotel, a desk was posted at the entry gate and a policeman had a file with him and was asking me to sign up. I asked why I should do so. The question about the why – in Chinese: “wei shenme?” – is usually answered by Chinese officials with “mei you shenme” (There is no why!). I refused to sign the file unless given a reason. There was no reason, so I left him there and took the lift to my room.

Chinese migration policy – lack of public explanation

Last week, I read in the news that China is now working on immigration policies to allow foreigners to stay for at least 4 days within the country without a visa. Good, but how does this fit with the obnoxious tracking of foreigners? China needed foreign investments and experts to take off economically and make its ‘open door’ policy in the 1980s a success. Many foreigners are still playing this role in China! In any country of the world, even the most populous one, immigrants (workers or professionals) play an important role for economic development. Overall, they contribute their experience and knowledge to skill/technology transfer and education. Not to forget that they pay taxes to their host country. It is true that in any group of people, you will find dishonest individuals, be they Chinese, Africans, Americans, Europeans or whoever, but targeting foreigners as such means you shoot yourself in the foot! The United States, the world's first economy, is a typical example of an economy built on migrants. And many European countries have benefitted from immigration, which introduced a labour force, as well as new ideas and lifestyles. The current situation might not be a good advertisement for the ‘Asian giant’ to keep on attracting still much needed foreign expertise and investments.

It has to be said that thus far, I have not seen any anti-foreign resentment amongst ordinary Chinese people – and speaking Mandarin presumably helps. There are many curious and open Chinese; this is well understood, and it's the same everywhere. But ‘official China’ is quite absent from the current debate. It is startling how little there is public speech against the ‘foreign trash’ rant. I am not saying that China should not control its borders, but there is a decent way to do so! Learning lessons from traditional immigration destinations’ policies (and police training) can be helpful for Chinese officials. Not acting against individual outbreaks of xenophobia is potentially very harmful to Chinese society – and discrimination of foreigners is clearly against the spirit of people-to-people friendship. 