



# Refugee Voices



Painting by Pasang Sherpa

## **Before Sleeping** by Intesar Aljabani

When I am in bed, intending to sleep,  
I suddenly recognize that this bed where I am is not my bed.  
This is not my room.  
Nothing around me is familiar.  
Who am I?  
I tell myself, oh, I am dreaming,  
But it's not a dream, it is the truth.  
I am in another place, another world,  
Completely different from my world.  
I realize that I have run away from my country and I am very far from home.  
That I decided to keep everyone safe and get another life in another land,  
To make better lives for all my family.  
But I am in such a hard new place with so many rules.  
Then I say to myself, many difficult things have happened in your life  
And you faced them every time, so don't give up.  
Take a deep breath and make your first move  
And keep going.

# Express Yourself - America and China

by David Li

## *Freedom of Assembly*

This morning, I found Manhattan almost perfect, except for two things: raindrops and a demonstration. The former made my clothes wet and the latter made my heart wet.

I was in a rainy street – Park Avenue between 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> – when I suddenly heard someone shouting loudly, “We need jobs now! We want work now!”

By approaching, I could see clearly what was happening: around 20 people, not a large group, were demonstrating by the roadside. Most of them were big African-American guys, and all were in blue raincoats. According to my experience in China, their style looked like there were only two possibilities: they were gangsters or “blue collars,” laborers. I preferred to think the latter.

Then I thought I got the correct idea of what they were doing. They were really jobless people who were angry with America’s current depressed economy, unfair social system, and low welfare support (at least compared to Canada or some European countries) – in short, they could not bear it any more.

This reminded me of something that happened in my hometown in China. As many people know, my motherland is a country which boasts that she is a free place for expression, media, faith, strikes, etc. But everything has its two sides. Especially in China, you will be laughed at if you easily trust in others – including the government.

My mother once got involved in a strike in 1997, as a leader. Around 200 workers went to the city hall, to see the mayor. Actually they almost got to their target. The assistant mayor came out and met them, recording (or pretending to record) some of their demands. Then he suddenly asked, “Tell me the names of five persons among you who organized today’s action.” They trusted him, and gave him the list. Everything looked smooth and peaceful.

Then you can guess what happened. The next morning, the factory owner gathered all the workers and declared, “Good morning guys, hope you’re happy here, but I must fire five persons among you now. They are ...” And he shook a piece of paper in his hand – a copy of the assistant mayor’s list.

So then I drew a conclusion that also contains two sides: the American working class, including those who are low paid, no matter how difficult it is for them to make a living or how miserable they think themselves, have to cherish the freedom given by American law. Imagine what they would meet in other countries without democracy, in a similar situation.

But on the other hand, we also have to think it over: how can we improve the American system? Does Wall Street earn too much? Do transnational companies get too much power to control this world? Do we need so many military actions abroad? Should we turn back to the Roosevelt Epoch, and away from the 30-years-long low tax rate period since Ronald Reagan?

America is now at a crossroad. Turn left or turn right? Maybe we’d better become a little more “Scandinavianized” to reduce blue-collar actions like this morning’s? Or be more like the Roman Empire? But don’t turn back to something like China, without basic freedom.

## *Religious Freedom*

I had almost no experience of religious affairs when I lived in China, though I was born and brought up in a strong community of religions. My first home was in a street named “Mosque” (there really was a mosque in that street), and my first primary school was next to a Protestant Church. And as you can easily imagine there were a lot of Buddhist temples in a traditional Chinese city like my hometown. I like to believe the Mosque, the Church, and the temples are still standing there.

Still, I was insensitive, even a little numb, to religion. But after I grew up, I wasn’t insensitive any longer. Then I discovered something important about religion

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# Love

by Destiny Esther Kalonji

I am thinking about the Love that is needed by the World.

Love is a part of generosity.

When you see a beggar in the street asking for help,

you share your kindness by responding freely.

They say love is blind, but not only between men and women, also between persons of the same sex.

The Bible says love forgives

even when you're hurt,

love doesn't suspect,

love forgets after forgiving.

Love doesn't discriminate but considers only that all blood is red.



Painting by Chhatra Gurung

*Student thoughts on this painting:* Natural beauty makes everyone happy, and people forget their sorrow, anxiety, fear. (*Hem Kumar Gurung*) When I see this picture I'm really homesick, because my homeland also has snow mountains and grasslands and blue skies.

(*Lhamo*) The man is fishing and thinking, if I catch a lot of fish, I will sell them and give the money to my wife, who will be very glad. (*Tin Do Maung*) The pair of birds on the tree are happy and singing, because the landscape's blue color means peace. (*Than Soe*)

# Kachin Weddings – Old and New

by David Dashi

For the Kachin people, weddings have always played a very important role in our life. A wedding reflected ones property, ones blessings, and the extent of ones family or clan. The number of people attending the wedding indicated how great and widespread the family was. Nowadays, Kachin people don't practice all the old customs, because of changes in religion and ideas, but a wedding is still a great occasion for every Kachin.

Our traditional weddings can be divided in three parts. First, asking for the bride. Then, accepting the traditional gifts. Finally, celebrating the wedding.

There are many different clans (families) among the Kachins. People never get married if they are from the same clan on the father's side, so a man marries a woman from his mother's side. There is one common and basic tradition, that the bridegroom has to marry his mother's brother's daughter even though they are first cousins. Most Kachins follow this tradition, so they can keep and maintain property in their family. Even when a girl has just been born, some parents of a son ask the family of the uncle's daughter if they will accept him. Whenever the arrangements are made, they are not made by the bridegroom himself, but his parents or his father's parents. The family of the bride or the bride herself can reject the request if they don't like it.

There are different points of view now about the advantages and disadvantages of these arranged marriages, but most people remain very sensitive to the fact that marriage is not only the union of bride and groom but the union of two different extended families.

Traditionally, asking for the bride is not an easy thing. The family of the bridegroom-to-be needs to select a group of representatives from its elders, who will ask for the bride. They visit the bride-to-be's family taking with them a big gong. They are introduced and ask for the bride. If the parents of the bride accept their request, they need to give long swords and spears in exchange for the gong. And then both

sides consult about the legacy that must be given to the family of the bride.

Kachin ladies are expensive. If you have a son, you have to prepare before asking for a bride. There are a lot of things to buy. Traditionally, they included twelve essential things -- among them a piece of ivory, some dark gold, a gong, a whole or a piece of an elephant tusk, a necklace made of precious beads, long swords, spears, a piece of cambric and other textiles, a colorful hand-loomed blanket, and some oxen or buffalo. After the bride's family received these gifts, they needed to give back baskets containing a traditional meal made of glutinous rice, eggs, chicken, and vegetables. Then they sent the bride to the bridegroom's family.



Photo courtesy of  
David Dashi

In my opinion, giving a lot of property for a bride is the same as buying a bride, and I believe that buying a human being is not acceptable in the modern world. We still bring some gifts when asking for a bride, but now that means showing our appreciation and gratitude to the bride's family for raising her.

Finally, the wedding ceremony is celebrated. Long ago the festivities always took a week or two weeks, because many of the families lived far away. In those days, Kachins were Animist and they sacrificed animals to the gods to bless the wedding. Nowadays most Kachins make Christian marriages. During the wedding period, all the relatives of both families

come, carrying baskets of traditional food. And they all together have a big meal with toddy made of rice. The bride gives a bag and sword to the bridegroom, meaning that she is giving him the responsibility and the tasks of overseeing their family. After that the two become one.

For me, I really want to build my marriage and family by love. Love is stronger than any other thing. Love has great power and unity. Love offers freedom to choose and freedom to move. Surviving with a loved one is more meaningful than stability with an unloved one.

## Money

by Ngima Pakhrin

I get no kiss from my wife when I have no money,  
I start to work, get wallet full, she calls me honey!

We need money to buy the things we need and the things we want, not only commodities but also services. What can we think of having these days without money? Can we travel? Can we see a doctor? Can we imagine bread on the table? Can we watch TV? Everything requires money. Then why shouldn't my wife get upset when my pocket is empty? She has to pay rent, she has to pay bills, and she needs to buy food for the family. She cannot do all these without money. On the other hand, her mood is relieved when her pocket is full. She has happy smiles instead of anxiety. She isn't the only one who expresses her feelings about money, many people's faces look relaxed when they have money. Unless they become greedy – then they get anxious.

People in developing countries may not need money for everything. Many countries in Asia, and I have heard also in Africa, grow their own food. In this case, money isn't very useful. What do people need money for when they grow their own food, they have a house, and there is no need to pay taxes? They make their own clothing. They do not watch TV, do not have a telephone. But still, they cannot live completely without money. They cannot grow salt. If they want ornaments, they need money

to buy them. I have heard that people could barter for those things in the old days, but a barter system almost does not exist nowadays. They have to sell their own products to get money and use that money to buy the things they need. In Nepal people still do that.

We have to work or do business to earn money. Money measures people's skills, and the qualifications of working people. The more money one can earn, the higher the standard of living, the less money one is paid, the lower ones status. But I do not feel like that in New York. Ones status is measured by how hard s/he works. It does not matter what work one does, it matters how much money is paid for the work, and if the person working is satisfied with the work s/he does.

We have to look into other sides of money as well. Money creates crimes in many countries. Money makes people dishonest. People kill other people for money, kidnap for money, fight for money, end relationships for money, build relationships for money, migrate for money, contract for money, corrupt for money, die for money, cry for money, beg for money and work for money. Can we imagine life now without money? Can we have a life separate from money? In this perspective, what do you think money is: POWER? Super POWER? Or NOTHING!?!

## A Dog

by Mariama Barry

In New York, the middle-class dog wears clothes and boots.  
The dog takes water from a bottle the same way people do.  
The dog is a considerable personage.  
I like this.

## My Son

by Nawida

Bahram.  
Intelligent, funny.  
Watching movies, studying, learning.  
He wants to be a doctor and jog.  
Five years old.



Painting by Pasang Sherpa

## New York Poem

by Ely

New York City? Wow!  
 The biggest and most beautiful town  
 that I have ever seen in my life.  
 I'm really superseded.  
 I feel like I'm lost,  
 Like my life's gone back to zero.  
 Every day, there is a new lesson to learn, like:  
 How to buy a metro card,  
 Looking at the map before moving.  
 Here people measure their steps  
 When they walk.  
 They have a way to stand in each place and  
 There are a lot of different places.  
 But I don't care.  
 I have to conform and quickly.  
 There isn't another way.

The paintings in this issue are by students in Gilda Pervin's art class at IRC's New York Resettlement Center. As Ms. Pervin told us, "The students' enthusiasm for their images has led them to reach for all the English they can muster to talk about their work, and listen to each other." We'd like to thank Ms. Pervin and her students for their beautiful and imaginative explorations of the refugee experience.

## What's In a Name?

by Angele Nogue

Here I am  
 I am young and strong and beautiful  
 There are so many things about myself  
 that I like, but most of all I love my name.  
 My name is Valerie.

I love the way it sounds and how my lips move  
 when I say it.  
 I love writing it and seeing it in print.  
 You might ask me why.  
 I will try to tell you.

First of all, look how it starts.  
 It starts with the letter V.  
 When you write a V, first you go down  
 and then up.  
 Life can be that way sometimes, but you end up  
 on the up side.  
 Up is where I finish.  
 My name has valor in it. Bravery.  
 I know I am brave and not afraid of what I have  
 to do to reach my goals.

My name is a constant reminder of who I am  
 and what I want to be. Of my spirit.  
 It also ends with an "e." "E" is the first letter of  
 the word "end" but not the last.  
 Another thing I like about my name is  
 the way it sounds.  
 If you say it over and over, it sounds like music.

If I had to choose a name for myself  
 I would choose Valerie.  
 I would choose it because it is who I am.

People also like to call me Angele.

That means – Angele is a heavenly name.  
 My mom likes to pray,  
 that's why she gave me the name Angele.  
 But I am of this world.  
 So I prefer Valerie.

*[continued from page 2]*

To start, it's dangerous to believe what your first glance tells you. If you want to find religious buildings in China, it looks almost the same as other countries with religious freedom, like America. But if you want to establish a church, you must go first to a government department to register, and guarantee that you won't organize any religious activities out of government control.

Then do you think everything will be OK? Don't be naïve! The police will follow you everywhere and every day. On Sunday mornings, when you and your fellows worship in your church, you will find some strangers who call themselves "newcomers." Be careful! Some of these strangers are actually policemen. Their true goal is monitoring your church's daily running. They will even try to convert some of your church members into their agents. When you gather at your home with a few friends, the police will also appear, watching (normally through a telescope), to check whether the same people gather there every week.

If you are a missionary or pastor from abroad, congratulations! You will get some extra "care" from the police, an invisible "tail" everywhere you go until you leave China. If you are Chinese with foreign citizenship, speaking perfect Chinese, they will recognize you and add your name to the list of people who need special care.

One of my close friends, a pastor from Malaysia (Chinese face, Chinese-speaking, but Malaysian passport), does missionary work in rural Guangdong province, not far from the border with Hong Kong. In the past five years, he has been bothered, threatened, and frightened numerous times by the local police. Several times they pushed him very rudely, saying "Go back to your f\*\*\*\*\* country now! Don't harm China any more!" But if you have a white skin, come from a powerful country like the USA, UK, or Canada, and stay in a big city like Shanghai, they will deal with you much more carefully.

Finally, however, you shouldn't always look at China through old eyeglasses, even though it is a country without democracy and freedom. Time is moving on, while China is also changing every year. Do not treat China as a

medieval, savage country, or something like the former Soviet Union or Vietnam. Actually the "National Security Police," who deal with religion and politics, have more education and behave much better than the regular police. They are polite, humble, dressed neatly, some even have pretty high degrees. Maybe they know more about US laws than you do. They prefer persuasion to force. And culturally speaking, all Chinese people are normally open-minded, flexible, and humorous, compared to many of their Asian neighbors.

Within police or government circles, there is a pretty loose atmosphere, and space to talk about sensitive issues. And as individuals, they are also vivid ordinary people with colorful personal lives. Even when blocking your religious activities, they will say, "Hi, buddy, I love you, but you must obey my order, 'cause I am responsible for my government pay."

They read all kinds of "forbidden" books, share the same viewpoints with you. But they will also betray you any time, if the government's price is high enough. Normally they don't call that "cheating." Their personal friendship with you is true, while their loyalty to their organization is also true. In China you cannot define such things with one word.

So if you choose to live in China, no matter what you decide to do, religious or non-religious, it's wise to make a few close local friends outside government. They will teach you every unseen potential rule in China. The kind of "changes" China has made have nothing to do with reform of the political system, but are more like a little cosmetic advance.

This reminds me of an old joke: Some Europeans came to a solitary island in the South Pacific, and were surprised and angry to find the locals still eating human flesh. They blamed the well-dressed local leader: "Hundreds of years have passed. But no change has happened on your island!" He replied, "My friends, I am puzzled that you say there are no changes here. Everybody knows that we used to eat human flesh with our hands. But since you whites came here, we have learned to eat human flesh with a knife and fork."

China's great changes are exactly like that.

# The Last Year in Keremin Refugee Camp

by Khun



IRC Photo Archive

“A free man is hard to control,” says one of the sentences in a story I read in a classroom three years ago. But a refugee who lives in a camp in Thailand is easy to control, in my opinion. Let me begin with the month of November, 2009. I was teaching full-time at Karemin Refugee Camp 2. I was happy with my classes and students since I could share my knowledge with them. I taught geography and physics, every day except Saturday and Sunday.

In my free time, after class or on a holiday, I worked on my garden. When I say garden, don't imagine a huge plot of rich earth. I dug a hole in a space full of stone and sand, took away the stones, and replaced them with fertile soil. To get fertile soil I burned leaves, and mixed the ashes with the waste from chickens and pigs. I raised the chickens but not the pigs. Raising chickens had one unexpected good effect – it troubled me when the news spread that chickens were the origin of influenza, HINI, so I took care of myself better than before. Anyway, the mix became a perfect fertilizer. Some people thought I was going mad, gardening on stone and sand. It took more than a month to see my garden fill with

vegetables. After that I could relax. Everyone knew I was sane. A friend helped me with the garden, and my family ate the food I grew. My routine was: from home to school, home to garden.

One evening there was a heavy rain and wind. I was in the classroom teaching geography – Middle East and North Africa -- and the wind brought the rain into the classroom. I wasn't able to manage the class any more and had to cancel. After I arrived home, my niece told me that my beloved garden's fence had fallen apart. The fence and the plants were all mixed up and some plants, like beans, were cut off by the bamboo sticks which I used to raise them. When I saw this mess I really missed my friend, who had gone to Australia with a resettlement program. He had never seen the fruits of our work together and now he wasn't there to help with the fallen fence. I was totally upset and wanted to give up the garden. But instead I tried to work to bring my garden to be as normal as before. It took me two weeks since I had free time only in the morning and after class in the evening. Finally my garden was green again. My mom came to pick fruit and vegetables. Most of my friends left for resettlement, but I was still spending my time in the classroom, in the garden, and back again.

*(This is the first of two parts – to be continued in our next issue.)*

*Refugee Voices is a journal of writing by clients who are studying or have studied in the English Language and Literacy Program of the International Rescue Committee in New York. For more information, please contact Erika Munk and Natasa Milasinovic at [refugeevoicesjournal@gmail.com](mailto:refugeevoicesjournal@gmail.com).*

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