

'It's not OK.'

The illustrated stories of women caught in the struggle for human rights in China, North Korea, and Southeast Asia.

By Radio Free Asia

Copyright © 2014 Radio Free Asia.

All rights reserved

March 2015: Second Edition

www.womensrights.asia

www.rfa.org



Foreword

Sisters, Mothers, Daughters, Wives:

The hidden gems in the struggle for human rights

by Libby Liu, President - Radio Free Asia



She has languished under house arrest since her husband, who remains in jail, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. Without being charged with any crime, she is barred from human company, constantly harassed, monitored by authorities, and even denied the medical care she needs as her health worsens.

Such is the fate of Liu Xia, Liu Xiaobo's wife. Liu's husband and his struggle are internationally recognized, but she also pays a high price—without any big award.

Throughout Asia and the world, women have shown courage and commitment to improving human rights. Their stories and their lives can inspire and instruct, but only if they are told, only if they are known.

Some of these women are caught in the struggle for human dignity through their husbands, their children, their loved ones, or their personal experiences. Some push forward to the front lines on their own through the strength of their convictions.

They all bear witness to the unique hardships and triumphs borne by women who fight for the rights of others from within Asia's patriarchal societies. Some choose to fight. Some do not. But all persist with undaunted courage.

Imagine glass. With lead it becomes crystal. These women urge us to look closer and peer into the reflection of their world. Only when we open our eyes to their struggle can we realize it is a shared, universal struggle for justice, fairness, and compassion. Their lives are made even more beautiful by the weight of their tireless convictions. When the light of the world's attention shines on them, these women like hidden gems brighten, dazzle, and amaze.



Introduction



'Some experiences have catalyzed women to be more engaged and they became extremely effective advocates.'



'The role of women in human rights struggles in China and in Asia is absolutely pivotal. In struggles over land and natural resources, community groups have at their core the women who are not only the leaders of these communities in many cases but also the core supporting elements.'

In Thai, there is a saying that women are the back legs of the elephant in the sense that they not only drive for the elephant, but they are also the strongest part of the core, of the movement of that animal.

So it is also in human rights struggles in many parts of Asia today.'



Defying Tradition and Injustice

Yorm Bopha and Tep Vanny challenge ancient Khmer values.



Illustration by Brian Williamson

For centuries in Cambodian schools, boys and girls have sung a poem in harmony: *'A virtuous woman is gentle; she speaks softly and sweetly; she walks without making a sound and smiles without showing her teeth.'*

But Yorm Bopha and Tep Vanny will have none of this.

Both women were not even 30 years old when they picked up megaphones, broke through police barricades, stood up to water cannons, and campaigned against corrupt politicians. Mostly, they spoke in defense of hundreds of poor families like theirs who had been forcibly evicted from their homes to make way for a luxury complex in the heart of the Khmer capital.

Convicted of 'intentional violence' and led away by police in December 2012, Yorm Bopha yelled: *'Who does the judge work for? Does the judge work for the people or not?'*

Thousands of people have either been evicted from their homes or are at risk of losing them since a Chinese development company was granted a 99-year lease in the Boeung Kak Lake area in 2007. The following year the developer began draining the lake to make way for construction. A promise of consultation with local residents was never honored.

The families who accepted relocation found themselves in places too far from their jobs and were deprived of transportation and without basic services such as markets and schools. Some were not compensated enough to buy a new house.

Yorm Bopha mobilized her neighbors and led resistance, demanding transparency and better compensation. When she was later sent to prison, charged with beating a neighborhood thief, Tep Vanny picked up the fight. Vanny ceaselessly campaigned for her friend's release, which she won in November 2013 when the Supreme Court ordered her case to be reinvestigated.

Many thought the sentence was meant as intimidation, as Yorm Bopha had led daily protests against the municipal government to secure the release of the 'Boeung Kak 13'—a group of women jailed on charges of encroaching on private land and obstructing authority.

Indeed, Bopha and Vanny were not alone in their mission, but they both paid dearly for their defiance. Prison sentences, defamation charges, insults, loss of income—none of this deterred them.

And as the years went by, repression only strengthened their resolve.

'I no longer have any physical strength. What I still do have, though, is my mental strength. If we don't want history to repeat itself, we need to get involved. I want my children to have a better future, a bright future,' says Tep Vanny, referring to the murderous regime led by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979.

Both women are married with one young child. Yorm Bopha is married to activist Lous Sakhorn.

They can claim victories even if the construction goes on and many families remain in limbo.

The 'Boeung Kak 13' group of women protesters were released early, thanks to their efforts.

And The World Bank, a large donor for land relocation in Cambodia where all ownership proofs were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, took notice of the women's claims and suspended loans at least temporarily in 2011.



While in prison, Yorm Bopha thanks to the tireless support of Tep Vanny and others became an Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience. She made her first trip to the U.S. in June 2014 to receive the James Lawson Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Practice of Nonviolent Action.

For her part, Tep Vanny was honored with the 2013 Vital Voices Global Leadership Award for Leadership in Public Life. Her message to the Cambodia Prime Minister Hun Sen was: *'We are not robots. We are human beings.'*

Now, the women have widened their scope of work to other social causes.

In January 2014, they were briefly arrested with five others as they attempted to deliver a petition to the French Embassy demanding that the right to peaceful protest in Cambodia be respected.

In the same month, they stood among other human rights activists outside Cambodia's Supreme Court to demand the release of 21 protesters arrested after security forces fired on striking garment workers on January 3, killing five.

'We still have plans. We will struggle until we have justice and solutions,' said Tep Vanny.

'People like us are not against development. But development must also come from the people themselves,' she added during an interview with the NGO Front Line Defenders.

'I had never thought about becoming a political leader. Women in Cambodia have never protested before. Just like me, they have stayed at home, cooked food, and looked after the children. But now, several women have plucked up the courage to join the struggle,' says Vanny.

To a large extent, these women are inspired by Yorm Bopha and Tep Vanny.





'Some of the female leaders in the community place real value on a collective effort.'



A Voice for Peace

Susanna Hla Hla Soe 'was paying attention to those issues when no one else was.'



Trying to understand what propelled Susanna Hla Hla Soe, 49, to dedicate her life to the betterment of women in her country does not take long.

In theory, being a woman in Myanmar should be an enviable position.

Not only is the country home to one of the most revered democracy activists in the world, Aung San Suu Kyi, it has also held the status of women in high regard for centuries. Even in ancient times, Burmese women enjoyed legal rights and economic independence rarely seen among Asian women.

But more than 50 years of military rule and ethnic conflicts have destroyed these freedoms. Many Myanmar women—particularly members of ethnic minorities—have had to endure not only discrimination but also rape, fear, and the breakdown of their families and communities under atrocious circumstances.

In the country's new climate of transition to democracy since 2011, women continue to contribute to every part of the economic fabric. They plant and harvest rice, drive heavy equipment on construction sites, maneuver buses in city traffic, and manage shops and restaurants.

However, according to the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), only 18 percent of females over the age of 25 had a secondary education in 2010.

'The main challenge for women today is the cultural and traditional belief that women are supposed to stay home. They are marginalized,' explains Hla Hla Soe who is quick to point out that only 4 percent of members of parliament are female.

'You can count on your fingers how many women have been chosen as village heads,' she told Radio Free Asia (RFA) in December 2014.

'We aim to have 30 percent of MPs be women. We need to work harder to reach that goal,' she told RFA soon after running in the Yangon Municipal elections in December 2014—an election she lost to Khin Maung Tint, a man, because of 'irregularities,' she said.

She is filing a complaint with the election commission.

Hla Hla Soe is a force to contend with, and she is being noted internationally for her dedication to alleviating poverty and bringing women's voice to the table—whether in peace negotiations, drafting new laws, or combating human trafficking.

'She was paying attention to those issues when no one else was,' says Khin Maung Nyane, deputy director of RFA's Myanmar service.

Born in Insein, in the northern suburbs of Myanmar's former capital Yangon where ethnic Karens have often settled, she was brought up with deep Christian values of charity. Her parents hosted foster children from the remote areas of Karen State to give them an education, and what was then a family tradition became a calling for her.

She earned a bachelor's degree and a master's in Zoology at Yangon University while volunteering for World Vision, a Christian humanitarian NGO dedicated to fighting global poverty.

Starting as a clerk, she became project manager and then rose rapidly through the ranks to top positions. World Vision also sponsored her education with leadership workshops and an MBA in NGO leadership from Eastern University, a Christian university in Philadelphia, in the United States.

In 2003, she joined the newly founded Karen Women's Action Group (KWAG) to empower women in war-torn Karen State. *'We were just working with our bare hands, without any funding or assistance. We used money from our own pockets,'* she told the magazine Irrawaddy in 2013.

When Cyclone Nargis ripped through the Irrawaddy Delta in 2008, Myanmar's then-ruling military junta refused offers of international assistance and forbade NGOs access to the disaster area.



Undeterred, Hla Hla Soe led an emergency relief team to resettle families and rebuild their homes. *'It was hard to build trust,'* she confessed to Irrawaddy four years later. *'We were also afraid to speak to the media,'* she said.

During these same years, she came to learn of the human trafficking of local girls to neighboring countries, and she worked with her own government and that of China to follow the traffickers and bring the girls home.

She later founded a group dedicated to combating the trafficking of women and girls, though she recognizes today that *'the problem has gotten worse.'*

In 2010, she became KWAG's executive director, and in 2012 she earned a humanitarian award from Inter-Action, a U.S. NGO dedicated to disaster relief, for her *'extraordinary leadership.'*

A wife and the mother of a teenage daughter, Hla Hla Soe has become a consummate advocate for women.

When President Obama traveled to Myanmar in 2012, she was able to hand him a letter, which read: *'We do not have proper legal protection of women in our country. Today in Myanmar, a woman can be sold, forced into prostitution, and physically and mentally abused by family members.'*

Now she campaigns not only for a fair share for women in the administration of the country, but also for their place at the peace negotiation table. *'We ethnic people have suffered from armed conflicts,'* she emphasized in her letter to Obama.

'We are happy about the peace process, but it needs to be transparent and inclusive,' she wrote.

Unbridled development is also a risk for Myanmar's ethnic groups, and Hla Hla Soe has clear views about this as well: *'If someone asks, do you need electricity, we will answer yes,'* she said at a peace rally in Yangon in June 2014. *'But not if our rivers fill with red sand.'*

In her work with other women's groups in Myanmar, she chairs the Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON), an umbrella group of local organizations. She is also a steering committee member of Women's Protection Technical Working Group, a network that includes United Nations agencies and other international NGOs working for the protection of women. And she is president of the Women's Peace Network, a local group of women activists headquartered in Yangon.

Above all, Hla Hla Soe's quest is for peace in her country, which has such a painful history.

'We are women, we are mothers, we are sisters,' she said in Yangon while wearing a sky-blue shirt, a symbol of her call for peace.

'We don't want our family members losing their lives because of war. We want our children to be educated. We want to live happily with our children.'



From Political Prisoner to Rights Advocate

Zin Mar Aung spent 11 years in a Myanmar political prison.

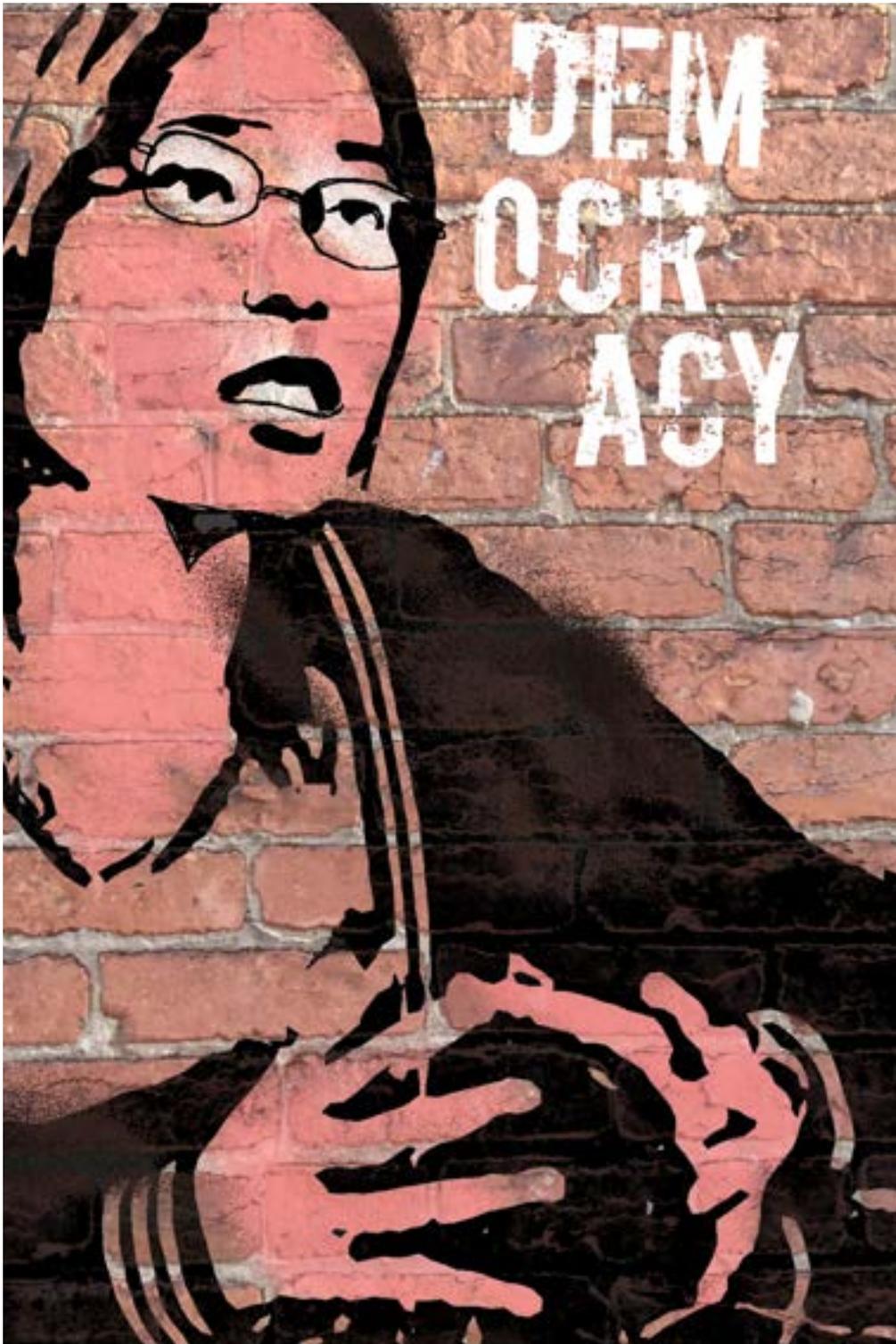


Illustration by Steve Fuchs

'The very first period of prison life is the most terrible,' says Burmese democracy activist Zin Mar Aung of the 11 years she spent in a Myanmar political prison, with the first nine spent in solitary confinement.

'But if we can overcome this period, we feel free, we feel stronger.'

Today, she is living testimony to that truth.

At the age of only 22, she was sentenced by a military court in 1998 to 28 years in jail, where she was often blindfolded and not allowed to wash or move.

But she was suddenly released in 2009—*'Pick up your stuff and go outside'* is the summary order she recalls—and went on to found the Yangon School of Political Science with friends and colleagues to *'train political activists.'*

She then co-founded the Rainfall Gender Studies Group to promote women's participation in democracy building and took part in study groups on Asian values and democracy.

Their motto: *'We will think what others dare not think.'*

In 2012, Zin Mar Aung was one of 46 women to be honored with the U.S. State Department's International Women of Courage Award.

Of her years spent in solitary confinement, she recalls: *'I did not feel lonely, because I had made up my mind,'* demonstrating a steely resolve to devote her life to the advent of a civil society in her country with a role for women at its heart.

Her prison sentence included seven years for each offense, one of them being the public reading of a poem promoting political freedom.

'We saw no rule of law. We were sentenced as they liked, and then some were released, just as they liked,' she recalled later. This understanding gave her the strength to endure. *'My conscience was clear,'* she said in an interview with RFA in 2012.

Zin Mar Aung also credits the inspiring role presented by NLD leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent 15 years under house arrest before being released in 2010.

'[Burmese] people do not prefer a woman to be a leader,' said Zin Mar Aung, underscoring the cultural ground remaining to be covered for women like herself, who do not benefit from the historical connections associated with Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burmese independence hero General Aung San.

'Listening to her speeches and her political discourse is really inspiring. It encouraged us to get involved in politics,' she said.

Myanmar's military seized power twice after the country gained independence from Britain in 1948, first in a 1962 coup d'état, and then a second time in 1988.

The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won elections to a constitutional assembly in 1990, but the junta refused to recognize the results. And as students organized and built a force of political resistance, Zin Mar Aung was arrested alongside many other activists. Some are still in jail.



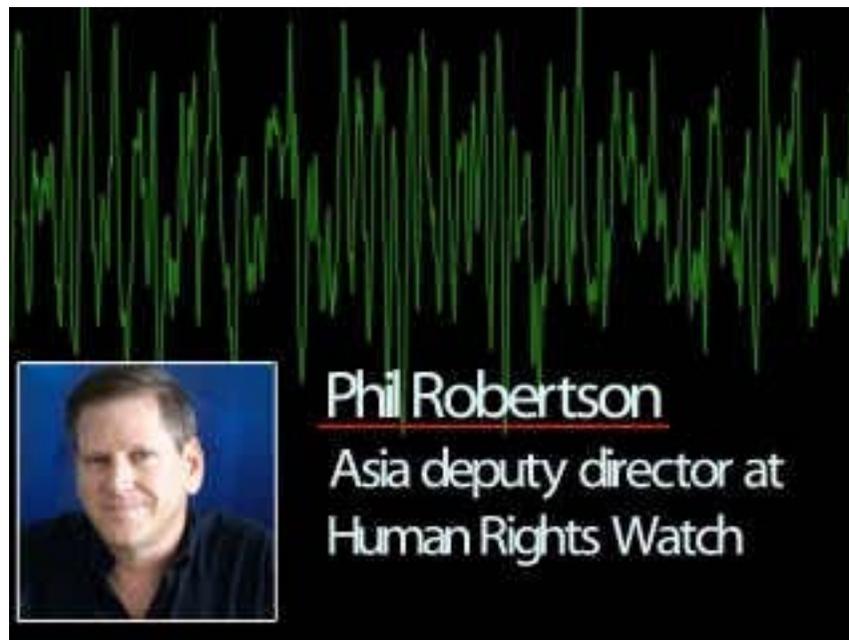
In 2010, NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi was released and Myanmar held elections for the country's parliament. In 2012, the NLD won 43 of the 46 seats contested in by-elections.

Although Zin Mar Aung recognizes that voices like hers have now gained a measure of freedom, she does not trust the sincerity of Myanmar's former military rulers, arguing in an August 2013 interview that the apparent liberalization of Myanmar has been aimed only at allowing foreign investments and loans to flow into the country to counterbalance economic domination by China.

And though she has welcomed early moves to professionalize Myanmar's military and police, more recently she has sounded alarms over attacks on the country's Muslim Rohingya minority and over an apparent roll-back of promised press freedoms.

She also opposes laws proposed by a radical Buddhist movement that would require Buddhist women to obtain permission before marrying outside their religion. *'As a Buddhist, it makes me very sad to see this,'* she said in an August 2013 interview.

Now, she has become even more forceful in voicing her concerns for Myanmar, and has recently received death threats. *'Liberalization is over,'* she told *The New York Times* in July 2014.



'In Burma, we are seeing a blossoming of NGOs and civil society groups in a way that few people ever thought was possible.'

In the lead of many of these groups are women.

They are playing a central role in organizing their communities to stand up on specific issues and demand their rights.

They are also playing a major role on the national stage. Recently there has been a lot of controversy on the so-called race and religion laws proposed by ultra radical monks. A number of women came up and actively opposed these laws, prompting the monks to label them as traitors to Burma.'





'She is a role model for Myanmar women of today. Aung San Suu Kyi had the courage to stand up to the generals when nobody dared to speak against them.'



Punished for Demanding Justice

Nurungul Tohti just wanted kidnappers to be apprehended.



Illustration by Steve Fuchs

Nurungul Tohti's story echoes the many legends and actual events in Uyghur history when women have stood

up for their rights.

But her own story is devoid of glamour as she sits in an Urumqi jail, incarcerated for the third time after she asked for justice following her son's abduction by a trafficking gang.

Uyghur women have held firm in the face of oppression throughout history, from the 18th century's 'Fragrant Concubine' Iparhan who resisted advances by the Qing emperor, to Rebiya Kadeer who now speaks out around the world for the Uyghur people.

Already a widow at age 33, Tohti was working in 2009 as a fruit seller in the northern Chinese city of Dalian when her son was kidnapped. She had temporarily returned home for a family emergency, leaving her son in the care of a neighbor. And when she received a phone call from her neighbor saying that her son had not returned from school, she flew back to Dalian.

'I immediately called the police in Dalian and reported the situation, but they never called back,' she said to Radio Free Asia. *'Finally, I took action myself to rescue my child.'*

Weeks earlier she had received phone calls from a criminal gang asking to 'buy' her seven-year old son Abbas Tayir. So she found it easy to call the abductors, threaten them with police reports, and secure her son's release.

But she suspected sexual abuse when her son told her he had been warned not to say what had happened to him during his captivity.

What began then for Tohti was a determined search for justice.

When Dalian police refused to take up the case, she traveled to Beijing where she petitioned in front of United Nations offices in the hope of getting the international community to pressure China over ethnic discrimination.

She was then detained by police sent from her hometown to bring her back to Xinjiang, but she escaped, was captured again, and was finally sent to Uchturpan, where she was jailed for 39 days.

Released upon her signed promise that she wouldn't leave home again, she immediately traveled to Beijing where she petitioned again, and again she was forcibly repatriated to her home.

Several times during the year, she tried to leave for Beijing but was prevented each time by police. By then, Tohti was calling her treatment an example of ethnic discrimination by Chinese officials against China's Uyghur minority.

In March 2012, as Chinese police rounded up petitioners and other activists in Beijing ahead of a meeting of the National People's Congress, Tohti was detained in front of a crowd of onlookers in Uchturpan.

'They dragged me to a police car,' she later told RFA. *'My legs were still outside the car as they drove off,'* she said.

Police asked her whether she felt ashamed to be seen in public in such a state, but she answered, *'If you feel no*

shame as a tough police officer, why should I feel shame as a victim of your brutality?'

A year later, an Uchturpan police officer answering questions from an RFA reporter said that Tohti was being held for 'threatening national security.' She was released after 18-month.

She was released on condition that she not leave Uchturpan again, but she left to find work as a waitress in a government building in the capital, Urumqi.

She was arrested again and is now jailed in the capital, where neither her family nor RFA reporters can reach her.

Tohti's story remains a testimony to the amazing force of spirit of a single, lonely woman confronting the machinery of an oppressive state.



A Mother's Anguish Drives Her Quest for the Truth

Patigul Ghulam asks what happened to her son and won't let go.

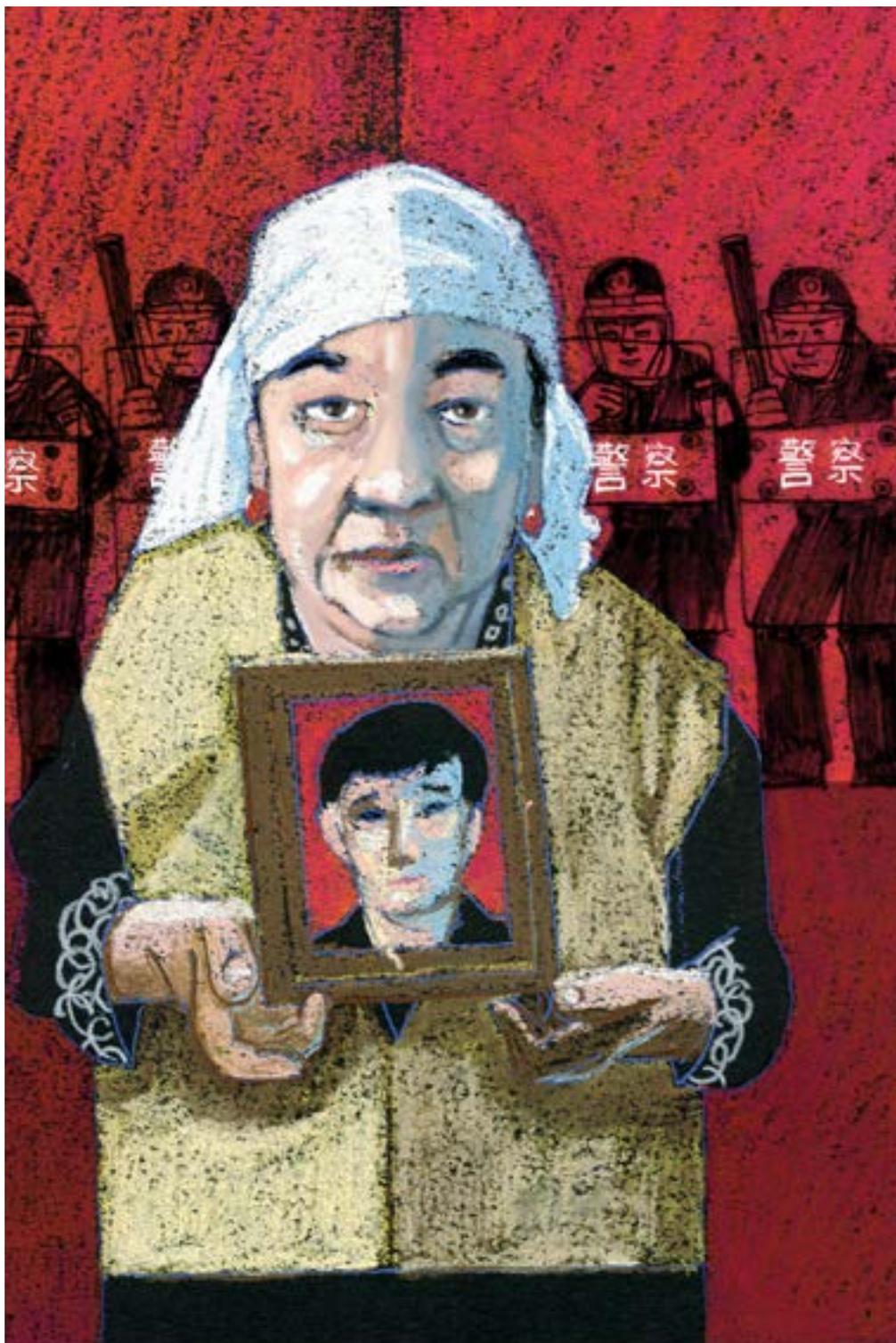


Illustration by Brian Williamson

'I don't have a gun. I have only my mouth and my tears, and you cannot control them'—Patigul Ghulam

Patigul Ghulam was arrested by police in the Xinjiang capital Urumqi on May 27, 2014, just five days after a deadly bomb attack on a market in the city. Authorities blamed the explosion on separatists in this far north-western region of China that lies closer to Almaty, Kazakhstan, than to Beijing.

Ghulam may not have been suspected of involvement in the bombing. But she was an outspoken, relentless, brave mother who wanted to know what had happened to her son five years earlier.

'Your mother incited the people against our government by raising an outcry in public,' the authorities told Ghulam's daughter, Patime Eli, who had accompanied her to the police station when she was summoned. Eli was later informed that her mother had been charged with 'leaking State secrets.'

Ghulam's son, 25-year old Immamemet Eli, disappeared in July 2009 during one of China's worst incidents of ethnic violence in decades. The last time she heard anything about him was nine months later when fellow inmates said he had been severely tortured and taken to a hospital.

Ghulam's son is only one of many Uyghurs who were forcibly disappeared in the aftermath of the Han-Uyghur clashes triggered by a peaceful march for justice in the Xinjiang capital. More than two hundred are reported to have died in the violence.

Overseas Uyghur groups have documented close to 50 other such disappearances, which rights group Human Rights Watch says are likely a small part of a much larger number.

Ghulam's June 2014 arrest marked her second in three years. In 2011, the widow and mother of four who makes a living with her needlepoint work was held for seven days for 'insulting police.'

Since starting to search for her son, she has been subjected to house arrest, placed under surveillance, and prevented from traveling to certain public areas in Urumqi including the Grand Bazaar marketplace and People's Square—especially during visits to Urumqi by regional officials or foreign diplomats.

Ghulam has repeatedly said, though, that she will speak to anyone who will listen about her struggle to find her son despite efforts by Chinese police and officials to obstruct her.

She has also spoken to foreign media and written open letters to the prime minister of Turkey—home to a substantial Uyghur population—and to a Turkish opposition leader before their respective visits to Xinjiang. In January 2014, she exhorted the visiting opposition figure not to believe the 'lies' that the Chinese government had told him about China's policies in Xinjiang.

She also wrote more than 30 letters to officials in Urumqi and Beijing asking about the fate of her son, spending a month and a half's worth of her second son's salary on stamps.

None of these actions has led to an answer for Ghulam or for the family. '*We need some time to clarify this issue,*' she was told.

Other parents reported similar evasions:

'We are continuing to look for them,' some were told.

'The investigation has ended, and we need to wait for orders from higher up before we can announce the findings.'

'Your son or daughter has escaped from prison, and we do not know his or her whereabouts.'

'Your son or daughter has been released, and may have fled the country.'

But Patigul doesn't give up.



Once, while being driven out of town during a city conference that had attracted official visits, Ghulam threatened *'to break the police car windows if I have to'* to get back home to her three remaining children.

She has been repeatedly arrested, bullied, insulted, and humiliated by authorities. But she is driven by a mother's anguish. *'I don't know where my son is, or even whether he is alive or dead,'* she says.

Asked whether she fears punishment for her repeated public appeals, Ghulam says that the authorities can do nothing that will hurt her more than the loss of her son.

'My everyday life is a kind of torture,' she says.

On July 7, 2009, two days after violence rocked Urumqi, in a rare and daring show of public protest, Uyghur women stepped forward to demand the return of their men who were arrested in large numbers by Chinese police.

Women of all ages, wearing Islamic scarves as well as high heels and sexy T-shirts, poured into the streets, raising their fists and screaming in the face of a momentarily frightened police.

'They fight for freedom, for dignity,' said one Uyghur woman interviewed by RFA, allowing a rare look into the psyche of women of the Muslim faith living in Central Asia.

Ghulam's continued quest and detention shows that their fight is far from over.



Stars on a Sunny Day

Dechen Pemba makes sure that Tibetan voices not heard inside China can be heard online.



Illustration by Steve Fuchs

'Tibetans in China are like stars on a sunny day—they can't be seen,' a Tibetan told a filmmaker as Beijing prepared to host the 2008 Olympics.

Dechen Pemba's mission is to bring those stars into view.

A Tibetan born just outside London, and originally more interested in German literature than in Chinese affairs, Pemba eventually gravitated toward her people's homeland and made a mission out of giving it a voice that the world could hear.

'My work today is dedicated to supporting voices from inside Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic,' she said at the 2011 Geneva Summit on Human Rights and Democracy.

'Tibetans are fully capable of speaking for themselves, and their voices are often eloquent [and] extremely courageous. It's important for those voices to be heard, represented, and amplified.'

Pemba is the founder and editor of the website 'High Peaks Pure Earth,' where English translations of poems, songs, and other writings by Tibetans living inside Tibet and the People's Republic of China can be found.

It has now become a major platform for Tibetan blogger Woesser and other writers and artists who use it to collaborate creatively across borders and beyond the reach of censors.

Pemba founded the website with her uncle, the historian Tsering Shakya, in 2008—the year that Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics, and the same year that major protests broke out against Chinese rule in Tibet.

It was also the year that Pemba was expelled from China, accused of 'illegal activities.'

Two weeks before the Games opened, she was put on a plane by unidentified men and told that she was subject to a five-year ban on entering the country. Though that ban has now technically expired, she has not tested it since.

The uprising in Tibet was brutally suppressed by Chinese security forces, and Pemba returned to London to begin work on a Master's degree in Chinese studies at the School of Oriental and African studies.

2008 was also the year in which a daring documentary, 'Leaving Fear Behind,' was produced, for which the filmmakers Dhondup Wangchen and Golog Jigme Gyatso were thrown into jail and tortured.

The film interviews ordinary Tibetans on their views of life under Chinese rule.

While in China, Pemba had met with Wangchen before his arrest and was able to record an interview about his motivation for making the film. She was also part of a network of friends who were able to secure the film's footage and smuggle it out of China in batches, and took part in its post-production.

The documentary premiered two days before the start of the Olympic Games, and was clandestinely screened for foreign reporters in Beijing.

Gyatso escaped from jail in 2014, and Wangchen was released in June that same year but remains unable to leave China to join his wife and children in political asylum in the United States.

In a 2009 interview with Human Rights in China, Pemba quoted one of the many Tibetans who had spoken openly to the camera:

'One of my favorite quotes from the footage didn't make it into the 25-minute version. It is from a Tibetan nomad who feels Tibetans in China are like stars on a sunny day—they can't be seen.'

Pemba's website now shines a light on those stars for the world to see, taking advantage of electronic media and dealing with issues like censorship with humor and eloquent writing.

Dechen Pemba, who speaks with a soft British accent, is a graduate of University College in London with a BA in English and German Language and Literature. Upon graduation, she moved to Berlin in 2001 to open an office for the advocacy group International Campaign for Tibet.

In 2006, she moved to Beijing to study Chinese at the Central University for Nationalities, where her thesis focused on Chinese perceptions of Tibetan culture and where she became more and more aware of the adverse consequences of the Chinese policy of forced integration.

She was also able to travel several times to Tibet and got to know prominent Tibetans living in Beijing, including the writer and poet Woenser.

Although Pemba had spoken Tibetan at home since her childhood, nothing in her early life had pointed to her eventual involvement in controversy.

But as China's fist began to close more and more tightly around Tibetan traditions and values, she found her calling in a persistent activism in defense of Tibetan voices.



A Lifetime Dedicated to Tibetan Values

Rinchen Khandro Choegyial lost her country, not her Tibetan heritage.



Illustration by Steve Fuchs

Rinchen Khandro Choegyial was born in Kardze, a town graced by a prestigious monastery in eastern Tibet. But her family was on a religious pilgrimage in India when the Chinese military crushed a Tibetan uprising in Lhasa in 1959. They never returned.

To this day, Rinchen Khandro remembers returning after playing outside into the house where they were staying and being told: *'We've just lost our country.'*

Well-to-do and devout Buddhists, her family lost everything and never returned home.

The family's hometown of Kardze is now a part of China's Sichuan Province. And the ancient monastery, destroyed and then rebuilt, today shelters about 700 monks—less than half the religious community it once housed.

These events colored the rest of Rinchen Khandro's life.

In a 2013 interview with *Tricycle* magazine, she recounts how her illiterate mother one day announced: *'We'll sell my jewelry and give the children an education. That's something nobody can take away.'*

So Rinchen Khandro went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree at Loreto College in Darjeeling, India, and later married Tendzin Choegyal, a younger brother of Tibet's exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama.

Nurturing Tibetan culture and Buddhist values and teachings in her life, Rinchen Khandro has become over the years one of the most gracious yet forceful representatives of Tibet in exile, always insisting that exile is temporary and that Tibetans—wherever they live—are a community in which women have a role to play.

Referring to Tibetan hopes for an eventual return to their homeland, *'we will never give up, and our [future] generations will carry it on,'* she declared during an interview with a visiting Canadian journalist in 2007.

Regarding the network of Tibetan schools created by the Tibetan government in exile, she told *Tricycle* magazine: *'[These] schools have given the Tibetans in exile their language, a sense of belonging, and a sense of identity.'*

After marrying and settling in Dharamsala, India, where the Dalai Lama also lives, Rinchen Khandro was a traditional stay-at-home Tibetan woman, raising two children and taking care of her mother-in-law until her death.

But once those years were over, she thought: *'Now I need to do something for the community.'*

In 1984, she became one of the founding members and the first president of the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), a body dedicated to the empowerment of Tibetan women. The association is responsible for the training of Tibetan women as leaders in their communities all over the world.

The TWA later came to global attention in September 1995 when it staged a demonstration during the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing.

There, in the heart of the ruling Chinese Communist Party's seat of power, nine brave Tibetan women marched with silk scarves tied over their mouths as symbols of repression, with tears streaming down their faces. The scarves themselves were a gift from the conference's Chinese hosts.

In 1987, the TWA founded The Tibetan Nuns Project to focus on the well-being of the many nuns who were

arriving in India from Tibet as refugees, some of whom couldn't even write their own names.

Then, in 1994, Rinchen Khandro was elected to the cabinet of the Tibetan government in exile, where she worked to improve the situation of Tibetan refugees and raise international awareness of the Tibetan cause. Her combination of Western education and deep attachment to Buddhist values made her the perfect representative to speak in international forums.

'The voices of Tibetan people, which speak for peace everywhere, must not only be heard, but listened to,' she told the Canadian reporter. *'Buddhism teaches [one] to live happily.'*

She later also served as the Tibetan exile government's Minister of Education and left a strong impression on visiting American students.

'She said, don't cling onto things when they don't turn out how you hoped they would. She said, let go and start fresh. It was a great interview to have at the very end of our trip,' one of those students wrote on the travel blog of the Watsonville, CA, Mount Madonna School.



Rinchen Khandro Choegyals' tireless service was later recognized in 1997 by a U.S. State Department Women of Courage Award.

But her work was still not over.

Over the last 27 years and still today, she dedicates her efforts to the Tibetan Nuns Project.

An institution born out of necessity when nuns fled Tibet in large numbers in the 80s, the project has blossomed into a major not-for-profit organization providing shelter and educational opportunities—previously available only to men—for five nunneries in North and South India.

Tibetan nuns traditionally were never as numerous as monks, and never had the same access to higher learning. Under Chinese rule, however, they endured an equal share of suffering.

‘When the nuns arrived in India, they were ill, exhausted, traumatized, and impoverished. Many nuns had endured immense physical and emotional pain,’ recalls venerable Lobsang Dechen, a nun herself and co-director of the Tibetan Nuns Project.

Today, under the careful watch of Rinchen Khandro, the project provides education, food, shelter, and health care to 700 Tibetan nuns from all Tibetan schools of Buddhism and ranging in age from pre-teen to mid-80s.

In 2013, 27 nuns sat for the first time for the Geshema degree, a doctoral degree in Buddhist studies. Their studies included all the academic challenges presented to Buddhist monks, including traditional debates about the nature of ‘truth.’

Following their graduation, exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama urged the successful degree candidates to take up active roles as teachers. *‘Until now you have relied on monks to teach you, but in the future it will be very important that there are also nuns to teach nuns,’* he said.



Choosing the Power of the Pen

Gao Yu is a veteran journalist in China who has been repeatedly imprisoned but never silenced.



Throughout her long career as a reporter and an independent columnist, Gao Yu, 70, has borne witness to China's recent extraordinary rise, achievements and faults included.

At an international award ceremony, she once quoted another Chinese journalist, Shi Liangcai as saying, *'You have a gun. I have a pen!'* *'History has given me the choice of a pen,'* she added during her acceptance speech for a Courage in Journalism Award in 2006.

Gao's career began the year that her country made a 180-degree turn toward a market economy. In 1979, as then-leader Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms, she became a reporter for the state-owned news agency China News Service. Working for the official media gave her access to the power elites in China, an asset that she draws on to this day.

Barely 10 years later she joined a liberal publication, the Economics Weekly, as deputy chief editor. She also freelanced for other media outlets, some of them in Hong Kong.

In November 1988, Beijing's mayor described one of her articles published in Hong Kong as a 'political program for turmoil and rebellion.' Gao Yu was, in his words, the 'people's enemy.'

In April 1989, as the Tiananmen democracy movement gathered momentum, the Economics Weekly began running a series of reports on the protests, urging the government and the demonstrators to resolve the stand-off through compromise.

As deputy chief editor of Economics Weekly, Gao Yu penned an article titled 'Dialogue between Yan Jiaqi and Wen Yuankai on the Current Situation.' The authorities considered the article an attempt to promote 'bourgeois liberalization' and ordered the closure of the publication.

On the morning of June 3, Gao Yu was arrested on her way to work.

She was released 15 months later because of poor health, including a history of heart problems.

But none of this has deterred her from using her pen again.

In October 1993, as she was about to take up a one-year fellowship at Columbia University in New York, she was arrested again.

This time, she was sentenced to six years in jail after being accused of publishing 'state secrets'—ironically in a pro-Chinese government newspaper in Hong Kong.

Gao Yu has always denied that the published information, including a speech by then President Jiang Zemin, involved state secrets.

In February 1999, eight months before the end of this second sentence, she was given parole, again because of poor health.

By then, the world was paying attention.

She was honored with a 1995 Golden Pen of Freedom and a 1999 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

In 2000 she was named one of International Press Institute's 50 World Press Freedom Heroes of the 20th century. And then, in 2006, she received a Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation.

All the while she continued to write news reports and commentaries—including one, for example, predicting during a March 2012 radio interview senior security official Zhou Yongkang's later arrest in what she described as a political purge.



Gao is also said to have once described China's leadership as a '*combination of a latter-day Nazi state and Stalinist communism.*'

So it comes as no surprise that she was among those arrested a few weeks ahead of last year's 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown.

She disappeared in April 2014. The next month, state-run media confirmed that she had been arrested once again for 'leaking state secrets' to overseas news media.

Though the document in question has never been publicly identified, it is believed to have been an order issued after China's current president Xi Jinping took power. Known as Document No. 9, the order urges draconian responses to 'dangers' to China such as democracy, civil society, and an independent media.

After her arrest, Chinese television aired footage of her expressing regret that her behavior had 'damaged the

national interest.’

She later recanted her remarks, with her lawyer and family saying she had been coerced into a confession in order to protect her son, who had also been taken away by the police. He was released a month later.

Speaking in her own defense at a four-hour trial on Nov. 21, 2014, Gao Yu denied leaking state secrets and reiterated that her ‘confession’ video had been made against her will.

Among her many client publications overseas, she has written for the German outlet Deutsche Welle’s Chinese program. In her last article for Deutsche Welle before her April 2014 arrest, Gao underlined the significance of reform-oriented party chief Hu Yaobang, who was deposed in 1986.

In another earlier article, Gao discussed China’s constraints on press freedom. When journalists with unwanted opinions don’t fall directly outside the law, she wrote, the government will still find plenty of ways that journalists ‘can run into legal complications.’

The Chinese government then proved her right by arresting her.



Tiananmen Mothers United

Ding Xilin, founder of the Tiananmen Mothers Victims Group, won't forget.



Illustration by Steve Fuchs

On the evening of June 3, 1989, 17-year old Jiang Jieliang disobeyed his mother, hopped on his bicycle, and rode towards Muxidi, a neighborhood located west of Tiananmen Square in Central Beijing. He had seen on television that the army was confronting student demonstrators there. He wanted to tell the soldiers, *'Don't shoot!'*

He never came back. His mother, Ding Zilin, later discovered that he had been shot in the back and summarily buried in front of the school he was riding past.

Twenty-five years later, the number of people killed on the night of June 3-4 1989 on and around Tiananmen Square remains a mystery shrouded by a persistent campaign of censorship.

Chinese officials have characterized the 1989 demonstrations as *'political turmoil'*, and have charged participants with *'counterrevolutionary activity'*. And all reference to the massacre has been erased from public discourse, as well as from the Internet, to this day.

At first stunned with sorrow, Ding gradually came across other families who were also privately mourning this tragedy that their own national leaders were refusing to acknowledge. So, together with Zhang Xianling, a mother who had lost a 19-year old son, she founded the Tiananmen Mothers, a support group that has turned into a formidable voice for justice in China.

Ding's grief found international expression in 1991 when she gave an interview to the U.S. news outlet ABC News in the United States. In that interview, the quiet philosophy professor from Beijing People's University and member of the ruling Chinese Communist Party was remarkably forceful in her demands: an independent investigation of the massacre, compensation for victims' families, and punishment for those found to be responsible.

But these demands have not been met, and harassment has intensified over the years for Ding and her husband, a university professor in aesthetics, as well as for other members of the group. Ding and her husband were first hindered in small and insidious way in their work—for example, not being allowed access to new research students.

Ding was forced to retire early. She was then expelled from the Communist Party, and her husband was also forced to retire. They have been detained, followed, sent out of town during international events, disparaged to their friends, and kept under 24-hour police watch.

But none of this has deterred Ding in her pursuit of justice.

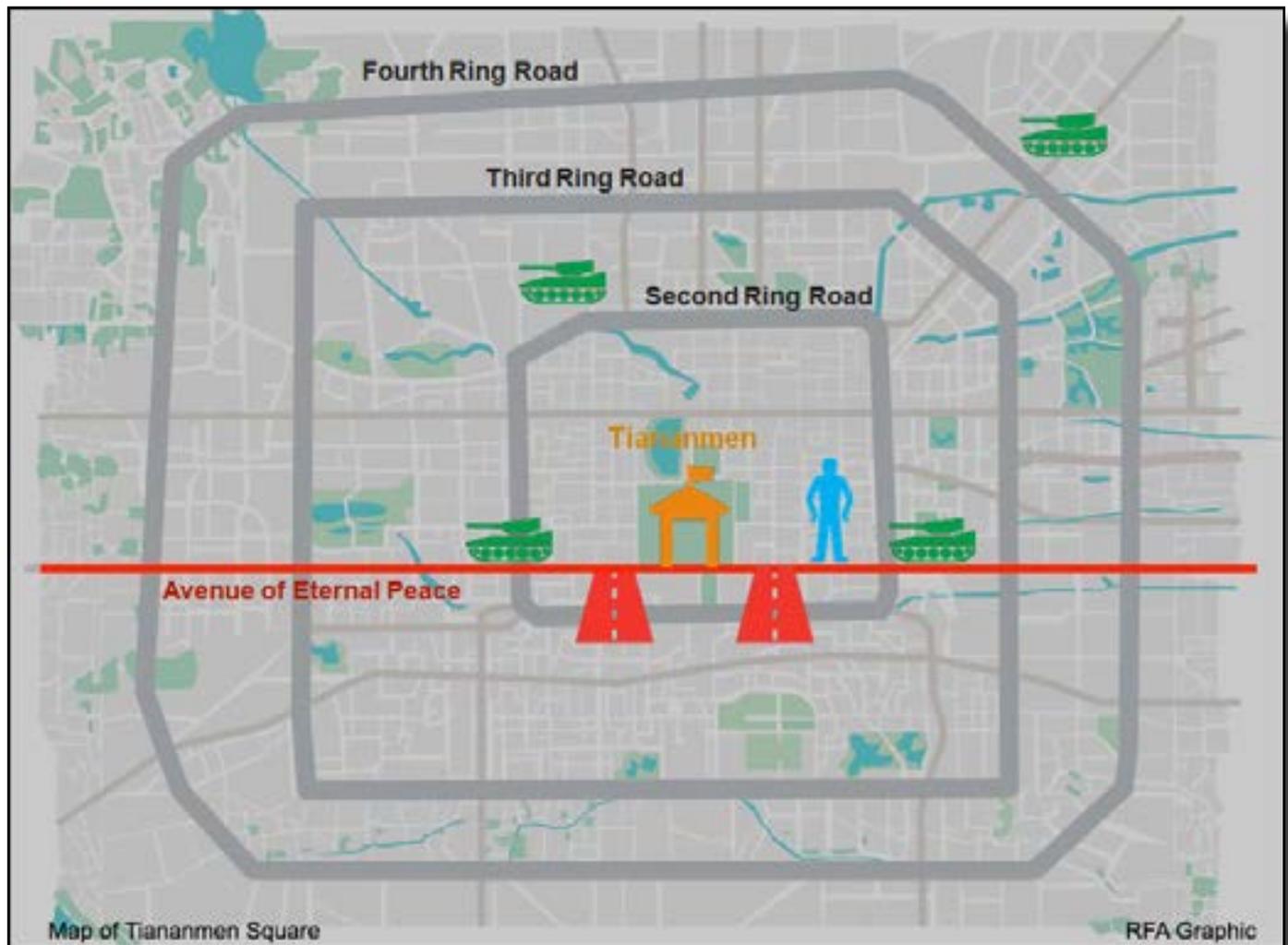
'Not only can they not suppress us, but in trying to do so they actually give us more strength,' she told CNN during an interview in 1999.

In 1994, Ding published a book, *In Search of the Victims of June Fourth*, about her quest to learn the circumstances in which people had lost their lives. Published in Hong Kong, the book is based on first-hand investigations and personal interviews of the victims' families, and has been the only account of its kind until now.

Her book earned the Vasyl Stus *'Freedom-to-Write'* Award in 2007.

In her book, Ding Zilin brings to life the faces of the many Chinese citizens who fell under the guns of their own country's army. One was a 24-year-old graduate student who begged soldiers not to fire on civilians, and who was shot at short range with a pistol. Another was a man who kept coming back to the hospital door, carrying wounded on a plank, until he was brought in on a plank himself.

Another was a young medical student who was tending to the wounded, who lifted her head at the wrong moment and was instantly struck by a bullet that killed her. Others were young people trying to avoid the mayhem by running away.



All were shot.

'These are only the tip of the iceberg,' Ding told CNN.

'From these countless, bloody facts, I have reached this conclusion: The 1989 student movement and people's movement were patriotic movements concerned with democracy and fighting corruption. They were not, as the government has said, counter-revolutionary rebels,' she said.

Over the last 25 years, the Tiananmen Mothers have repeatedly called for a dialogue with Chinese officials on a reappraisal of the crackdown. They have regularly petitioned the National People's Congress and individual leaders. *'We just write a letter, put a stamp on it, and mail it,'* she said.

Ding retired from leadership of the group in 2014. Yet even now, at 78, she is considered a threat by China's leaders.

'Social stability does not rely on bullets, on power and influence, or on deliberately forgetting the past,' she said to CNN, referring to present-day challenges to China. In her view, lack of accountability for the events of June 4, 1989 continues to fuel grievances among citizens in many other areas such as corruption and the unfair distribution of economic prosperity.

'They are a hugely influential group, politically speaking,' said Sichuan-based rights activist Huang Qi of the Tiananmen Mothers in 2012.

As the date of the massacre's 25th anniversary approached, extra care was taken to get the group's members out of Beijing and away from the places where they could have commemorated their lost children.

'Such a great, mighty, and 'correct' party is afraid of a little old lady,' Zhang Xianling, the group's cofounder, told NPR's Louisa Lim in May 2014.

Ding is now getting older, and the other members of the group are also getting on in age. They may not live to see their demands met, but they remain an inspiration whose voices refuse to die.



Former Political Prisoner, Still a Critic



Tong Yi was one of the students protesting on Tiananmen Square in 1989. Assistant to activist Wei Jingsheng until his arrest in April 1994, she was jailed and underwent 're-education through labor' in Hewan re-education camp near Wuhan in Hebei Province for two and a half years. She was beaten repeatedly for protesting harsh labor conditions.

'In the labor camp in I went to, we were forced to work really long, grueling hours. We worked 18 hours a day, no weekend, no holidays. They tried to exploit the women detainees' labor to the maximum.

'These conditions were not imposed on the male detainees.'



Today Tong Yi lives in California. She provides a harsh analysis of the status of women in modern China.

'Chinese women's treatment by society in general is worse than 20, or 30 years ago. Back then, women could hold up half the sky according to Mao Zedong. But now, Chinese women have become more like objects. Their political status, their work status in society, have become paralyzed. Within the family, they are more subject to domestic violence.

Women earn half to three quarters of the salaries that men earn even though they hold the same responsibilities and positions. It's a sad development.'



Finding Resolve in Her Husband's Plight

Jiao Xia paid the ultimate sacrifice, divorce, for the love of her husband



FPO Illustration by Brian Williamson

'They framed him! It's not OK. I'm not OK!'

After this heartfelt cry, Jiao Xia—who had just heard that her husband's prison sentence had been unexpectedly extended by eight more years—seemed to lose her mind. Before jumping headfirst into a river a few hours

later, she took time to call the police and say: *'He's innocent. I hope you have a conscience.'*

She was rescued and survived.

Jiao's husband is Qi Chonghuai, 48, an investigative journalist with 14 years of experience and known for his work exposing official corruption and social injustice. In June 2007, he released photos of a luxurious municipal building in Tengzhou standing in stark contrast to the surrounding poverty in this Shandong Province city.

He was subsequently accused of *'economic crimes'* and sentenced to four years in jail for *'extortion.'* *'I think he touched a raw nerve,'* Jiao Xia told Radio Free Asia during an interview in 2012.

That was an understatement.

Incarcerated in Tengzhou's jail, Qi Chonghuai wrote an article about the mistreatment of prisoners in the underground mineshaft where he worked. Although the article was confiscated, it later found its way out of prison and circulated online.

Beaten, exhausted by forced labor, and ailing, he nevertheless vowed to continue his work upon his release. But city officials came to interrogate him, and instead of going free as he expected in June 2011, he was retried summarily on the same charges. His sentence was then extended by an additional eight years for a total of 12.

One of Qi Chonghuai's lawyers, Wang Quanzhang, told Radio Free Asia in November 2012: *'The earlier stage of this case was a public authority retaliating against a whistleblower. The later stage was individual local leaders getting revenge on Qi Chonghuai.'*

As in the cases of other activists, lawyers, and journalists who fall under the wrath of corrupt officials or simply run afoul of the official Party line, wives are often left behind to fend for their families, to organize their husbands' defenses, and to speak up. Some show themselves to be adept at this, but others are unprepared for the challenge.

Years after her husband's arrest, Jiao Xia is still shaken. *'They broke down the door and took him away,'* she says, recalling his arrest. *'I can't bear to think of it. As soon as I think about it I get frightened.'*

As her husband's ordeal dragged on, with bruises and scars noticeable on his body at each one of her visits, Jiao Xia could barely make ends meet and worked two jobs to care for their teenage children, a boy and a girl.

She also struggled to find lawyers willing to represent her husband and continued to speak up about her husband's case, taking calls from journalists from China and abroad. *'My husband isn't the only journalist to be jailed in China,'* she told RFA in December 2012. *'Everyone can see the dark side of China, and my husband's detention... is proof of it.'*

But she couldn't seem to find a way out. *'Everyone knows what you say when the media interviews you,'* her husband told her during one of her visits. Authorities said: *'Tell your wife to shut up. If she makes irresponsible remarks, it won't be good for you.'*

Unexpectedly, she did receive some financial support from acquaintances, some of them anonymous, until deposits on her bank account were blocked.

On one family visit, seeing his children grown, Qi expressed guilt at not having been able to be a good husband or father. Later, he wrote to his wife, saying that he didn't think he would come out alive and that she needed to find someone else.



Jiao Xia and Qi Chonghuai had been married for 17 years, but Qi one day told his wife to divorce him. *'I haven't divorced you. How can you divorce me?'* was her indignant reply. *'What have I done wrong to make you want to divorce me?'*

Finally, her brother-in-law convinced her that this was the only way her husband could still attempt to shield his family from the retaliations unleashed against him.

Qi Chonghuai and Jiao Xia officially divorced in 2013.

Jiao Xia had dizzy spells, and her eyesight became impaired. She also suffered for a time from insomnia and depression.

In June 2008, Qi Chonghuai was honored in Washington D.C. by the National Press Club with its John Aubuchon Press Freedom Award for his efforts to reveal corruption.

And in December 2012, Qi was among the recipients of cash grants named for the American playwright Lillian Hellman and her longtime companion, the novelist Dashiell Hammett, that were awarded to writers who have been targets of political persecution or human rights abuses.

Jiao Xia was able to receive the cash award on his behalf.

Qi Chonghuai's name last appeared in the news on April 28, 2014, when a U.S. State Department spokeswoman urged China to respect freedom of the press.

And Jiao Xia hasn't given up. In an interview with RFA in 2012, she expressed a new determination: *'I'm not afraid of difficulties anymore, and I'm no longer weak,'* she said.

'I fought for him, for my husband's innocence. I didn't do enough, but I think there's still time.'



Firm in Her Beliefs

As an overseas worker, Tran Thi Nga learned in Taiwan that workers and citizens have rights—a lesson she took back to Vietnam when she returned.



Illustration by Steve Fuchs

With a toddler perched on her hip, short hair, and a voice raspy from haranguing a man she identifies as a

plainclothes policeman, Tran Thi Nga, 37, cuts a fierce figure of raw energy and determination.

In a stream of accusations laced with swearing, she berates the man who hides his face behind his smart phone. She says he was part of a group who prevented her from travelling to a human rights rally in Hanoi in May 2013. She was kidnapped with her child, she says, and then beaten and robbed by police officers.

'Today I came to expose you, the police,' she goes on as the man slowly leaves the room, walks to a car, and drives away.

But still she doesn't let go. *'You don't receive complaints from citizens,'* she continues to shout. *'You cover up for police harming citizens.'*

'They are all policemen here,' she tells a group that has assembled around her. *'They are a police department for repressing and harming citizens.'*

Tran Thi Nga has only her voice and her force of character to stand up against oppression in Vietnam. And she uses both fearlessly. *'Don't even think that you can oppress us by wearing police uniforms,'* she says to a man who ends up retreating into a building.

She was careful to videotape the episode, which took place on Sept. 19, 2013, at a government office set up to handle citizen's complaints in the town of Phu Ly, Ha Nam province, where she is from and still resides.

The video of the confrontation can be found on YouTube, and has been reposted many times under various pseudonyms.

Other videos are more harrowing. In May 2014, she was attacked while riding on the back of a bicycle with her children. Men armed with pipes beat her, chased her into a nearby car dealership, and came back no less than three times to inflict harm.

The video is as chaotic as the attack, featuring chilling screams as she tries to find cover.

On yet another video posted on YouTube, Tran Thi Nga is wheeled to a hospital, an arm and a leg in bandages and splints, and swollen bruises on what remains exposed of her body. Two little children run behind her stretcher, and Tran Thi Nga comforts them as she speaks to the camera to document the attack.

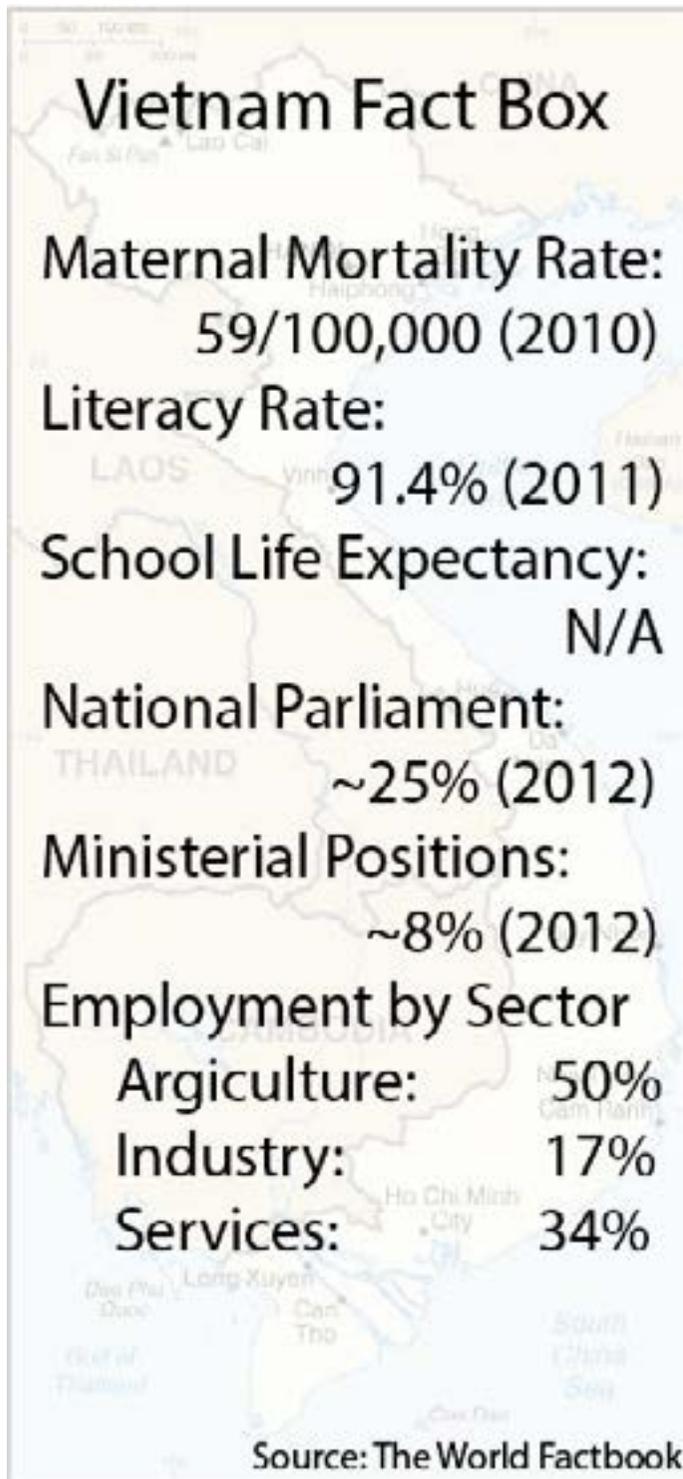
Physically assaulting human rights activists has now become a preferred means of intimidation for the Vietnamese government, which has intensified its crackdown on dissent. The Vietnamese Communist Party has ruled the country since 1975 and has little tolerance for the basic freedoms that its citizens increasingly demand.

About 200 political prisoners are currently held in Vietnamese jails, but many more activists are viciously beaten by hired thugs or plainclothes policemen in what has become a worrying trend for human rights organizations.

But what people like Tran Thi Nga lack in rights and protection, they make up in their fierce determination to

speak up and use the Internet at any cost to bear witness to the brutality of their regime.

Tran Thi Nga was only 20 years old when she used a broker, like many other young Vietnamese women, to find employment in Taiwan and send money back home.



First employed as a housemaid, she was then placed in jobs in various industrial concerns such as garbage sorting and the manufacture of plastic bottles, electronic chips, and plastic auto parts. While a maid, she worked from 4 a.m. to 9 p.m. The broker kept not only her passport but also 80 percent of her wages. New positions meant she had to pay new fees.

She would have never been heard from if not for a 2005 traffic accident that sent her to a hospital and then into recovery for the next three years.

It was through the Taiwanese police that she learned about the illegal nature of her treatment as a foreign worker. And during her recovery she educated herself on labor laws and rights with the help of a Vietnamese priest.

Tran Thi Nga still has a large hospital debt, but also a deeper understanding of human rights and a sharp eye for inequalities.

Back in Vietnam, she took it upon herself to intervene to defend abused laborers, particularly among women who were trafficked overseas. But she also speaks up and takes part in protests on political issues.

In 2014, she took part in anti-China protests that rocked the country following maritime confrontations in the South China Sea between the two countries.

Tran Thi Nga, who is the mother of four boys, spends all her time focused on human rights issues. She lives on the rent paid by tenants in her home and on the salary of her second partner, whom she cannot legally marry for fear that he may lose his job because of her activities.

She is now a member of Vietnamese Women For Human Rights, a recently established group that includes overseas Vietnamese wishing to lend support, training, and encouragement to those who stand up to defend human rights in Vietnam.

She is also a member of Bau Bi Tuong Than, a domestic group set up to provide assistance to prisoners of conscience and their families.

Tran Thi Nga has no political ambitions—just a firm belief in the rights of Vietnamese citizens. As she tells the plainclothes officers who surround her in the video from Phu Ly, *I am a citizen. I have a right to stand here!*



When the Struggle for Justice is a Family Tradition

Do Thi Minh Hanh follows in the footsteps of her parents and grandparents in standing up to oppression.



Illustration by Brian Williamson

Her grandparents fought to free Vietnam from French colonialism. Her father was a fighter pilot who fought to protect South Vietnam from the invading Northern army. Now, she fights for her country's freedom from

an oppressive Communist Party.

Do Thi Minh Hanh was 18 and studying economics when she became an advocate for those without a voice in her country. By the time she graduated as an accountant, she had traveled to Hanoi to support the cause of petitioners seeking redress for the loss of expropriated farmland and had been detained and held under house arrest several times.

Do is a pretty girl with a beautiful singing voice. She was born on March 13, 1985 in the Central Highlands province of Lam Dong, a scenic and mountainous area covered with lush forests and rich farming land.



Do's grandmother was awarded the title of 'Martyr' as a person who had sacrificed her life for national independence and freedom. Her father was captured by the Vietnamese Communist army and spent two years in prison after the war. Later, her mother testified before the U.S. Congress to ask for help in obtaining the release of her daughter from jail when Do finally landed there in 2010.

But her family heritage does not explain fully why at age 20 she was already a labor activist.

Her early work as an accountant was not enough for her energies, and she had soon quit to focus on labor rights, traveling around the country to help workers organize to demand better pay and adequate safety on the job.

A member of Dan Oan (Victims of Injustice), a petitioners' movement seeking redress for dispossessed farmers, she also helped to found the United Workers-Farmers Organization (UWFO), an independent—and outlawed—union formed by dissidents in 2006.

In December 2009, Do went undercover to travel through Cambodia and Thailand to attend a labor conference in Malaysia.

In 2010, she visited a mine site in the western province of Tay Nguyen, where Vietnam had struck a controversial deal with China for the extraction of bauxite, the raw material for aluminum.

The deal had been challenged by dissidents and activists as being environmentally risky and as offering excessive concessions to Vietnam's powerful neighbor China. Do and her companion, fellow activist Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung, secretly took pictures at the mining site and posted them on the Internet.

Under the alias Hai Yen, Do then gave several interviews to foreign media accusing the government of cozying up to China and selling out the country. The Vietnamese authorities were paying close attention.

In February 2010, she was arrested for distributing leaflets and 'inciting' the workers of a Mekong delta shoe factory to strike for better pay and improved working conditions.

Although a negotiated compromise was finally reached between workers and managers, Do and two friends, Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung and Doan Huy Chuong, were arrested for 'disrupting national security' under Article 89 of the Vietnamese Criminal Code.

In a closed proceeding in October 2010 hearing, the three were neither represented by counsel nor allowed to speak in their own defense. And at age 25, Do was handed a seven-year sentence.

'I cannot bear the shame the staff makes me undergo on a daily basis,' Do told her mother a few years later when concerns for her health raised alarms in both Europe and the United States.

She was detained with common criminals, and at times she was shackled and repeatedly beaten by both wardens and other detainees.

Then, suddenly on June 26, 2014, she was released and went home to her parents.

In an interview shortly after her release, and still visibly shaken, Do described her experience in detention: *'A lot of people were sick. But illness was only a small problem. [My health] is not as important as my spirit. So I was able to overcome whatever happened to me.'*

Always the negotiator, she also described trying to bargain with prison authorities, though to no avail. Both Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung and Doan Huy Chuong are still in jail along with other prisoners of conscience. Upon her release, Do made a point of reminding her supporters of their fate.

Much has been written about Do on social media and in various Vietnamese publications, and she seems to have captured the imagination of young people who admire her spirit.

And she, in turn, admires them.

'I'm very happy to be free because I see changes,' Do says. 'Our society has begun to move in a more positive direction after my four years, four months, and three days in prison. [Young people] strengthen my belief in the path that I have chosen.'



'Do Thi Minh Hanh was recently released from prison. However, she was prevented from leaving the country when she tried.'

Clearly the (Vietnamese) government fears her ideas. They fear her views getting out to the international community.

Among workers in many of the factories in Vietnam, the predominant number of workers are women. These women work in factories producing products for export around the world.

Do Thi Minh Hanh, principled, intelligent, and courageous: Is this the kind of person the government fears and wants to lock away?’



Dr. Binh The Nguyen is a cardiothoracic radiologist and assistant professor in radiology at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, in Bethesda, Maryland.

Dr. Binh Nguyen has been advocating for human rights, especially in Vietnam and Asia. *‘Women feel there is no one out there to support them.’*



From Vegetable Seller to Activist

Sivanxai Phommalath demands compensation for seized land and finds herself in the cross-hairs of obscure police and financial interests.



Like many people in rural Southeast Asia, Sivanxai Phommalath, 35, made a living from the land, selling vegetables from her kitchen garden at a small stall by her house.

That was until big development money came to the Yommalath district of Khammuane province, central Laos, where she lives.

In a story often repeated in the developing world, the totalitarian government of this impoverished nation undertook a massive project—the building of the Nam Theun II dam—to generate electricity and foreign currency. The local population was relocated to other grounds.

Corruption, mismanagement, and abuse from local police swiftly followed. Phommalath's family of three saw their plot of land expropriated, along with that of her neighbors, and they accepted an offer of compensation that turned out to be deceptive and inadequate.

Phommalath has said that most of her neighbors who enjoyed 'good connections' with the authorities left the area after receiving plots of land and compensation. But she does not have such useful connections.

She owned a second plot of land nearby, but officials came back and declared that the initial compensation settlement of about \$900 now covered that land as well. The second plot had been earmarked for the construction of a major road, the officials said.

This time, Phommalath decided to demand compensation '*at market prices,*' she said.

In November 2012, she heard that help in the form of advice was available if she and other villagers traveled to the neighboring province of Savannakhet on Laos' border with Thailand.

The trip was in vain, as no one showed up at the meeting place on a bridge over the Mekong River. '*We all returned and I did not think it was a serious issue,*' she said to RFA at the time.

But once back home, the group was arrested. After one night in the old French colonial jail of Thamkhikai, the other villagers were soon released. She was not set free. She was neither charged nor sentenced.

'I heard the police asked each other what charge they will give me. They talked about 'creating unrest' and 'leading villagers to protest.' Then I was locked in the jail,' said Phommalath.

That's when the mother of a toddler, with only a primary education, got scared. She burst into tears.

Locked up behind high walls, deprived of natural light and family visits, manufacturing wax flowers and eating prison food, she was held for close to three months without charge.

However, she was repeatedly questioned about the identity of the 'high ranking official' she had meant to meet in Savannakhet but who failed to show up. '*The policemen often asked me to name the official that we went to meet in Savannakhet province. But I do not know his name,*' she told RFA.

On Feb. 8, 2013, she was asked to pay a fee of 700,000 kip (\$88), promise not to take part in 'unlawful' actions

and let go. *'I do not understand why the police arrested me, because what I have done is only lead people to a meeting to get help,'* she said.

Laos, which is a large beneficiary of international assistance, has a difficult relationship with Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs.) In early 2014, the government introduced a new set of restrictive regulations that were severely criticized internationally.



The country is also under diplomatic pressure because of the unexplained disappearance two years ago of social activist Sombath Somphone. Somphone, 62 at the time, was a winner of the prestigious Magsaysay Award for his work on participatory development issues.

For Phommalath, the prison stay was an eye-opener. She emerged from jail no longer prone to crying and no longer afraid. She was now referred to as an ‘activist’ in media reports.

'I will move out of my land if I get fair compensation. If not, I will not leave, even if I am arrested again,' she said in August 2014.

She even started to build a new house on the second plot of land, confident in her rights and comforted by the fact that she pays property taxes on that land every year.

So far, no one has bothered her again. But for how long?



Looking for Her Husband and Not Letting Go

Ng Shui Meng, the wife of a renowned Lao activist who disappeared in 2012, just wants her husband back.



Illustration by Brian Williamson

On Dec. 15, 2012—a quiet Saturday afternoon in Vientiane, Laos—Ng Shui Meng and her husband were driving home to dinner. She had just returned from a meeting. Following in his beat-up jeep, he had just played his regular game of ping-pong with a friend. She could see him in the rearview mirror of her car until she passed a police checkpoint.

Her husband, Sombath Somphone, never made it home. And Ng was soon propelled onto international headlines, demanding his return.

'If he has committed any crime, then charge him in court and allow him the right of due process according to law, and allow his family the right of visitation,' Ng asked Lao leaders, speaking in an interview with RFA a year later.

What has happened to Sombath, a highly respected civil society worker who dedicated his life to helping the poor in Laos?

Lao officials in the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Assembly, and the Prime Minister's office offer no explanation.

Kidnappings of those who question the all-powerful political apparatus in Laos are not rare, but this one was captured on tape by a police camera set up to prevent crime in the streets of the capital.

Ng was able to record a viewing of its footage with her cell phone, and this is now on YouTube for all to see.

On the video, Sombath's jeep is seen stopped in front of a police post at Km4, Thadeua Road. Someone then gets in and drives the jeep away. A white truck approaches, Sombath is led to it, and the truck takes off as the door slams shut.

'Half of me is missing,' Ng told RFA later in an interview. Careful, like her husband, to avoid being described as a *'human rights activist,'* she nevertheless refuses to give up her pursuit of the truth.

Ng now navigates a difficult path between her determination to bring back her husband and her concern not to offend in a country where no dissent is tolerated.

Though Sombath's case has been widely reported in the international media, it has received no coverage inside Laos.

'There seems to be a wall of silence that's fallen inside the country,' Ng said in April 2014, adding that people fear discussing Sombath's case and that the space for civil society work in Laos has now *'narrowed.'*

Ng and Sombath met in 1978 at the University of Hawaiï. She was working toward her PhD in Sociology, and he—a son of poor Lao farmers in Khammouane Province—was getting a BA in Education and an MA in Agriculture.

A Singaporean, she became a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and then worked for UNICEF in Laos, China, and East Timor until 2008.

Sombath opted to return to Laos after the Vietnam War to help in the work of reconstruction. A devout Buddhist, he was known to speak gently but very frankly about the issues affecting the long-term development of this rural country.

His initial work included demonstrating low-cost methods of improving farm production and food security. Later, he pioneered the use of participatory rural appraisal techniques in Laos.

Then, in 1996, he was given permission by the Ministry of Education to establish the Participatory Development Training Center, PADETC, to provide training in community-based development for youth and local government officials.

In 2005, he received the Ramon Magsaysay Award—an award often referred to as Asia's equivalent to the Nobel Prize—for community leadership.



Never one for confrontation, he nevertheless spoke to defend those who did not know how to speak for themselves. Land grabs, inadequate compensation for those displaced by dam construction, health care, and education were some of the causes in which Sombath intervened to try to find just solutions.

In 2012, he played a leading role in the organization of a meeting in Laos of the Asia Europe People's Forum, a civil society grouping that brings together national leaders from across Asia and Europe.

The meeting took place on October 2012. Though 300 participants were expected, 800 people showed up.

The meeting's success may have worried some in Laos who profit from the country's unchecked development at the expense of local villagers.

Now left brutally alone after 36 years of a shared life and a common cause, Ng cuts a small figure in her steel-rimmed glasses. But she won't stop asking for her husband's return.

She now joins the ranks of other women who have seen their husbands—journalists, activists, social workers, and political figures—punished by repressive regimes and who are left to carry on a front-line fight they never trained for.

'I've lost my husband,' Ng told the U.S. newspaper *The Oregonian* in an interview. *'What can they do to me? I've got nothing more to lose.'*



‘What kind of country is this?’

Park Sun-young is an indefatigable defender of the ‘survivors’ of Korean history.



Illustration by Steve Fuchs

At 58, Park Sun-young cuts a frail figure with graying hair and a slender frame. But don't be mistaken: she is probably South Korea's fiercest defender of those she calls 'the survivors of our history.'

In a country torn apart geographically and politically, she speaks up for South Korean prisoners of war (POWs) still held in the North, for those who defect to freedom via China, and for the elderly Russian-Korean Kareisky, who live on Russia's Sakhalin Island or in Central Asia.

She also speaks up for the so-called 'comfort women,' Korean women and girls who were forced into prostitution by the Japanese military during World War II. With an indignant '*What kind of country is this?*' she tries—and often succeeds—to shame South Korea's political class into paying attention.

Park was a journalist for 12 years, and then a politician.

She was a member of parliament from 2008 to 2012 for the minority Liberty Forward Party, and a constitutional law professor since 1978. She still teaches law at Dongguk University in Seoul.

Park is also the founder of Mulmangcho, meaning 'Forget-me-not,' an organization dedicated to helping North Korean defectors, especially the young and the old. Mulmangcho has built a school in Yeosu, Gyeonggi province, that caters to the needs of orphans and traumatized children. Mulmangcho also builds nursing homes for the elderly.

Discussing an 84-year old former POW and defector she knows who picks through trash to make ends meet, she angrily shouts, '*What kind of country is this?*' '*My temper has gotten a lot worse since I took this job,*' she admits.

During a visit to the United States in 2012, Park made an emotional appeal: '*Meeting with North Korean defectors, I spent the last four years raging in anger and wailing to God, not comprehending how suffering like theirs can happen in human history.*'

As her four-year term in parliament was coming to an end in 2012, she led a 77-day protest against the repatriation of North Korean defectors then detained in China, holding rallies in front of the Chinese Embassy in Seoul.

She even launched a 10-day hunger strike in an appeal to the U.N. Human Rights Council until her frail body collapsed. '*I wanted to show that I was hurting too,*' she explained to the Korea Herald at the time.

China has an extradition treaty with North Korea and regularly repatriates North Koreans who cross the border in the hope of reaching South Korea. Human rights activists say their fate on being returned is almost always imprisonment, torture, and death. Park has called these repatriations tantamount to murder.

On March 23, 2012 the United Nations Human Rights Council finally adopted a resolution condemning human rights violations in North Korea. The resolution passed by consensus when North Korea's allies in the Council did not object. '*It was a miracle,*' said Park.

Although even her own family includes defectors from the North, she insists that it is her 30 years of professional experience that have kept her focused on the fate of 'abandoned and forgotten' Koreans.

'I began taking care of North Korean defectors not because of personal relations, but because of my scholarly conscience and professional ethics,' she told an RFA reporter in 2012.

She has traveled 13 times to Japan to negotiate recognition and compensation for the World War II 'comfort women,' victims of sexual exploitation by the Japanese army. Successive Japanese governments have alternatively acknowledged and then denied such mistreatment. The issue remains unresolved.



As a lawyer, Park knows her facts. 'Article 3 of the Constitution defines nationality,' she said. The article reads: 'The territory of the Republic of Korea consists of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands. By extension, the South Korean government has the duty to protect the human rights of North Koreans, just as it does the rights of South Koreans.'

As a politician and journalist, she is well aware of the media's importance when fighting for a cause. In one noteworthy effort to shed light on the plight of defectors in South Korea, she organized a foot-washing ceremony three days before Easter 2012.

'Many people said that they could not take off their socks, though, because they had lost their toes to frostbite during their escape,' she recounted. 'But I convinced them, saying that this was not their fault but rather a part of our painful history. I told them, 'Let's just gather our courage and express this pain.' The defectors then exposed their mutilated feet to the public.

Park remains obstinate in the face of others' complacency. Holding a bundle of letters written by former South Korean POWs now living in the North, she announced that she was founding her own publishing company to make them public. None of the South Korean companies she had contacted had wanted to risk publishing them.

In March 2013, the United Nations adopted a Human Rights Council Resolution establishing a commission to investigate 'grave violations of human rights' in North Korea. The commission began its work in December 2014, but the issue of POWs is not on their list of concerns.

Park's job is far from over.



Feeding North and South at the Breakfast Table

Dr. Lee Ae-ran defected from North Korea to the South and remains determined to bring the two halves of the country together.



Illustration by Steve Fuchs

Born in North Korea—a country plagued by recurring food shortages—Lee Ae-ran was a food inspector before escaping in 1997 to the South where she became the first female defector to earn a PhD, specializing in

food and nutrition.

And that's only part of her story.

Lee Ae-ran founded a traditional cooking institute in Seoul in 2009, and now runs a North Korean restaurant. She was the first North Korean defector whose name was placed on a list of National Assembly candidates under South Korea's Proportional Representation System, but was unable to secure a National Assembly seat as her political party did not get enough popular votes.

'I am one of those displaced people from North Korea. I feel obligated to represent them,' she said at the time to the South Korean publication *Daily NK*.

She also worked with the *North Korean Youth Christian Meeting*, a group dedicated to assisting defectors in difficulties, and she is involved with efforts to connect refugees with people who can provide financial stability.

Today she dreams about reconciling the North and the South, separated since 1948, around the dinner table.

'We can all start the day with a meal at the same table, with foods from both Koreas,' she told the Christian news network CNB in an interview in 2013.

Dr Lee is driven by a deep-felt need to help others that may be a legacy of having suffered so much herself.

Born in Pyongyang in 1964, Lee was just 11 years old when her family was banished to a re-education prison camp in North Korea's harsh Northern Yanggang Province because her grandparents had defected.

She thought she could rise above the persecution by studying hard, but to no avail. The Kim Il Sung regime forbade labor camp detainees from applying to college and conditions were so harsh that she once drank agricultural pesticides to end her life.

It took a change of policy for her to be able to apply for college, and she chose *'food and nutrition'* as a major. She explained later that her choice was based on a wish to help those who did not have enough to eat.

She then married a medical doctor and started a family. But news came out in a book published overseas that her father had opposed Kim Il-Sung in the early years of the regime.

Lee knew all too well what that would mean in terms of retaliation. She chose to defect with her parents and her 4-month old baby boy. In all, nine members of her close family defected, leaving behind her husband, who was not informed of the plan.

After a three-month trek through China and Vietnam, the family arrived in South Korea in December 1997. The many cultural differences they encountered were a shock. *'It is tough to live in a capitalist country, because with this come many responsibilities,'* she said.

To support her family, she was successively a bathroom cleaner and an insurance salesperson before going back to school at the Ewha Women's University in central Seoul as a food and nutrition major. She subse-

quently became a university professor in nutrition.

'I especially wanted to remove for my child the sense of inferiority that comes from all the limitations that are applied to everything for being in the North Korean defector category,' she explained.

She also became a strong advocate for North Korean women defectors and helped children adjust to the more demanding ways of a capitalist society. *'You could say that I started the work to solve my own problems,' she said.*



Lee founded the South's first culinary institute for North Korean style cooking in order to preserve the many local recipes that North Korean themselves can no longer enjoy in their own country due to shortages of ingredients caused by poverty.

Then came the North Korean restaurant Neung-ra Table, located on one of the oldest east-west thoroughfares of Central Seoul, Chongno.

There she serves Naksadon Jeongol, a North Korean style chowder made with a boiled mixture of octopus, apple, and pork; or Pyongyang Onban, boiled rice served in chicken soup; or Haeju Bibimbop, rice served with chicken breast mixed with soy sauce instead of red pepper paste; or Eobok Platter, a kind of bouillabaisse prepared with meat.

All are prepared without any additional or artificial flavors. Only soy sauce, red pepper paste, beef broth, garlic, and onion serve as condiments.

But there is more to Lee's ambition. She now wants to bake a *'Reunification Cake,'* a wheat flour-honey cake baked in the traditional Kaesong style. She's been baking it for a few years, but complains that she can't increase production to satisfy the demand from customers. What is lacking are precious investment funds, she says.

Lee rebels against defectors being kept dependent on subsidies and speaks up in favor of North Korean defectors starting small businesses like her restaurant in order to become self-reliant.

She recognizes that defectors have their own problems when they arrive in the South because of the wide gap between the two cultures and economies. Attendance at work is one of them. This is why she feels that North Korean defectors themselves are the best intermediaries to help their compatriots adjust.

'We are helping them to adjust gradually to the South Korean culture,' she says.

'We dream of a unification where North Korean defectors can easily settle down through North Korean defector-run companies,' she says.

In 2010, Dr. Lee was honored with a Women of Courage award from the U.S. Department of State. *'I was doing what I was naturally supposed to do for North Korean refugees in difficult situations,'* she said then. *'I'm flattered to receive such an award, although I have done nothing.'*





'Many women are trying to escape from North Korea, trying to seek refuge overseas.

Many of them are trafficked into marriages with Chinese men, forced to bear children before they can sometimes get free and continue on their way to South Korea.

It's a terrible sacrifice they make because often they have to leave their children behind with these Chinese men. They make the supreme personal sacrifice in order to get free, get to South Korea, and find a way to eventually provide help and assistance so the rest of the family can come out.'



Conclusion



'When the outside world expresses concern about these individuals it is a powerful motivating tool for people who face terrible reprisals for advocating rights that almost always exist on paper but are denied to them.'



Artists' Statement

'Nothing in a portrait is a matter of indifference. Gesture, grimace, clothing, decor even—all must combine to realize a character' (Charles Baudelaire, poet and art critic).

We were invited to illustrate the stories of women across Asia struggling for human rights.

We wanted to create a series of distinctive portraits, using a variety of mediums and techniques. This goal was rooted in both the desire to treat each story as unique as well as the practical limitations of using the available reference photos and videos. For some women we found an abundance of photos documenting their public struggles. For others we found virtually no visual reference, as they struggled alone.

Capturing the essence of a person from a video or few photographs is a challenging prospect. When the subject of your portrait is a part of a larger narrative, the project becomes even more daunting.

For this project we used a variety of mediums: pen and ink, watercolor, pastel, scratchboard, pencil, and computer to not only reproduce a likeness, but illustrate an individual story of courage.

Brian Williamson

Steve Fuchs



Acknowledgements

This e-book is based on reporting and interviews conducted by the RFA language services in Burmese, Lao, Khmer, Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Vietnamese.

All RFA language services have contributed ideas, reporting, and interviews to the project.

Producer: Minh-Ha Le

Illustrators: Steve Fuchs and Brian Williamson (Office of Digital Design and Innovation)

Executive producer and writer: Catherine Antoine

Editor: Richard Finney

