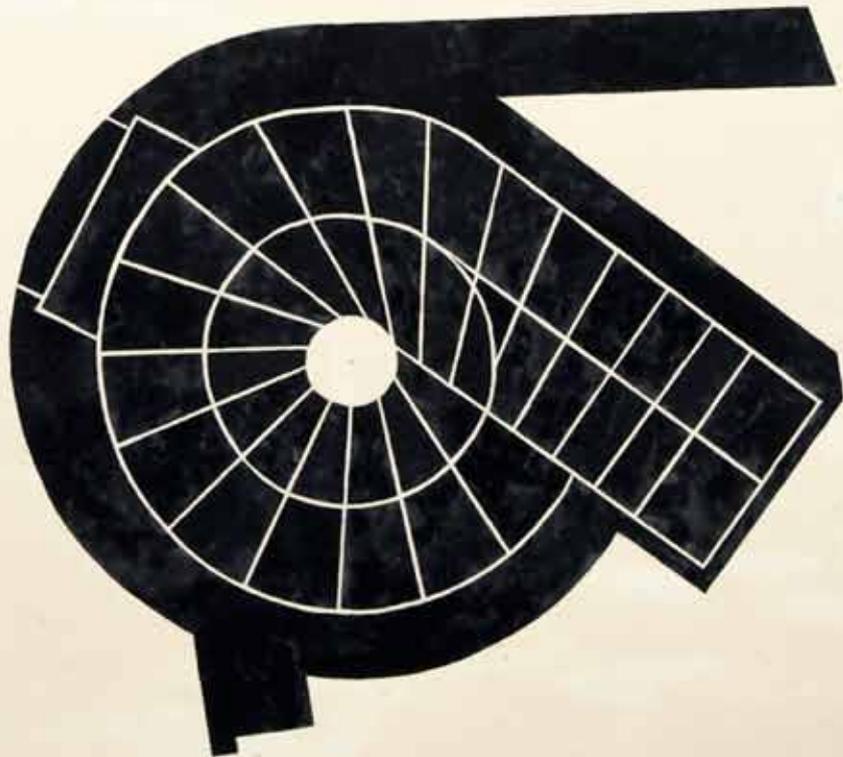


A JARFUL OF STARS

Reflections on a decade of the Burmese Refugee Project

By Celina Su

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EMILY HASS, WILHELMSAUE STRASSE, 3 STAIRS 3. GOUACHE ON PAPER, 19 × 23 INCHES, 2011

WHEN I MET NUAN, in 2001, she was – I think – seven years old. Like others in this small Burmese refugee community in rural northwest Thailand, Nuan did not know her birthday or her age. She did know, however, the day of the week on which she'd been born. At local Buddhist temples, there are often stupas lined with a separate shrine for each day of the week, and I am often the only one who doesn't know which shrine to pray to, the one who wanders around in circles, again and again. I am awkward there; I sometimes feel like a graceless American unable to read social cues, to understand subtle body language in a culture that discourages overt expressions of disapproval, or to follow rituals that are second nature to others.

At that time, Nuan was attending an informal school for Shan Burmese refugees, run by two local volunteers. These Thai volunteers were barely surviving themselves and mostly living off kale they grew in their backyard. The "school" was just a thatch roof on four poles, a chalkboard, and some benches, situated on the edge of a large field with uneven grass. Yet the volunteers had built such rapport with the community that they achieved 100 percent attendance every day for two years. They taught all the children in the area – thirty or so, ages five to thirteen – at the same time, relaying the fundamentals of basic math and Thai reading and writing.

A few months before, I'd received a \$1,200 personal check from Dorothy Goodman, the mother of the slain civil rights activist Andrew Goodman, to work on youth empowerment. I felt honored but did not quite know what to do with the money. Perhaps the social workers could use it to pay themselves and hire assistants, so that they did not have to teach all the students at the same time? With this seed money, then, I cofounded the Burmese Refugee Project (BRP) with Peter Muennig, now a professor at Columbia University who focuses on public health issues, and the one who had first stumbled upon this community in his travels.

During my first visit, I simply tried to give the Thai volunteer teachers a break by teaching very basic English – telling the time, the names of animals. When I pointed at a picture and said, "Tiger," a large group of squirming children repeated, in unison, "Tiger!" When I said, "Elephant," they chimed, "Eeee-la-phant!" When I said, "Oooooooh, rhinoceros," they echoed,

"Ooooooohrhinoceros!" When I passed out worksheets at the end of the day, they immediately tackled the assignments with relish, shouting, "More homework! More homework!"

I was supposed to know what I was doing – as an academic, I research community organizations and attempts by everyday citizens, especially youth from marginalized communities, to substantively participate in community development and policy-making. Yet, as a practitioner working with the BRP, I had no idea whether Nuan and her friends would be able to further their schooling, or how they might go about growing up, articulating and working towards their aspirations. My mind simmered with questions like, *But how does one operationalize dignity? What does meaningful participation look like in such restricted contexts?*

NUAN IS ETHNICALLY SHAN, a member of one of the ethnic minorities in Burma/Myanmar. (The military junta changed the country's long-standing English name, Burma, to Myanmar in 1989. Nevertheless, many political parties, organizations associated with the ethnic minorities, and some countries continue to call the country Burma to protest the legitimacy of the junta.) There are now more than half a million of them in Thailand. For the past few decades, the military dictatorship in Burma has had a policy of Burmanization, which bans the Shan language from public institutions. The military junta has also sometimes pitted ethnic minorities against one another to prevent the emergence of organized dissent, conducted mass rapes along border

Sylvester Stallone specifically helps Karen rebels, who are traditionally Christian, fight the Burmese military junta.

Partly because they tend to be Buddhist, like the military junta, most Shan do not receive official refugee status from the Thai government. Instead, they are often seen as voluntary economic migrants who choose their marginalized status in Thailand, even as "push" and "pull" factors blur together for so many of them. (Push factors are typically defined as the unfavorable conditions in home countries – severe environmental damage, violent conflict, abject poverty – from which migrants flee, and pull factors are the attractive conditions – a more hospitable economic climate, political and religious freedom, peace and security – that migrants seek in moving.)

Nuan, for example, is originally from a town outside of Roi Rem, a city in Shan State in Burma. Most of her neighbors were Shan as well, but some hailed from Burma's Arakan State. Her neighborhood had around one hundred households, almost all of which she considered middle-class. They worked as rice and garlic farmers.

Although there were rarely Burmese soldiers in her neighborhood, they frequented surrounding areas. Many military junta training camps were stationed nearby, and they often took villagers as forced laborers in the camp. Furthermore, soldiers in the city center demanded 30 percent of all profits from crops sold in the market there. Although these were called "taxes," they were known to line the pockets of the local soldiers. Nuan's family had also heard that soldiers routinely raped women in villages closer to the border, such as those surrounding a town called Hua Muang.

HOW DOES ONE OPERATIONALIZE DIGNITY? WHAT DOES MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION LOOK LIKE IN SUCH RESTRICTED CONTEXTS?

villages, and captured many Shan as forced labor for the national army. The Saffron Revolution in 2007 and news of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrests and recent triumphant release gained worldwide attention, but overall, relatively little on the plight of Burmese minorities and refugees appears in the global mainstream media and pop culture. When Burma's ethnic minorities are mentioned, some draw more attention than others. In *Rambo 4*, for instance,

When she was around four years old, Nuan's mother passed away, and her father left the family and moved to another province. Nuan's older sister, Ying, became Nuan's guardian. At five, Nuan was burning small bits of wood into charcoal to sell at the market. Ying says she had heard that Thailand had a benevolent king, that people lived in peace and did not fear the ravages of civil war. (When Ying told me this, I could not tell whether she truly believed it or knew that this was what Thais wanted to hear.)

So at fifteen, Ying decided to give Thailand a try. She packed three outfits, dry food, and rice, and joined nine others from her village, including Nuan, on a trek to Thailand. They first walked to Lankur, a border city on the Burmese side. This took one day. Then they walked for six days through the jungle. At some point during their journey, they ran into Thai soldiers, who did not ask them for IDs. According to Ying, back then Thai soldiers were a lot less strict about Burmese refugees coming into the country. In fact, they even gave the girls rice to help them along the way.

Eventually, their group stumbled upon a village of Lisu people, an indigenous hill tribe in Thailand. They were not sure whether they were really in Thailand, however, because the Lisu people did not look Thai to them and because they spoke Shan. There, Ying, Nuan, and their fellow migrants worked for five to six days for money. Each earned around five hundred baht (approximately twelve US dollars). Before working for the Lisu, who are themselves considered a poor ethnic group within Thailand, Nuan and Ying had only five hundred Burmese jaht, or approximately seventy cents, with them.

Eventually, Ying found work at a restaurant in Maehongson Province and worked there long enough to garner an annual, renewable working permit. Less than a year later, she met another Shan migrant who had been living in Thailand for quite a while. They married and moved to his boss's garden. Nuan stayed with her sister the whole time, living in a one-room bungalow on stilts, with thatch walls and roof. Soon after moving to Thailand, she began to attend the informal school where I met her.

MIGRANTS LIKE NUAN AND Ying are at the margins of refugeehood in several ways. First, within Burma, they are caught in the crossfire of many political and economic groups and interests. Some of the refugees I met also spoke about how, back in Burma, they were pressured to hand over earnings or be conscripted by Shan rebels who emerge from the jungle at night, as well as carrying weapons over long distances for Burmese soldiers. Even before they left Shan State, these families did not know to whom they should or could safely pay allegiance.

Many of the local Burmese road signs are now in Chinese script, and the migrants' families have been displaced to



EMILY HASS, MAHLERSTRASSE, 8B EXTERIOR 1. GOUACHE ON PAPER, 19 × 23 INCHES, 2011

the outskirts of town. Chinese investors funding the junta have razed villages built in the Shan architectural style and replaced them with newer, bigger, Chinese-style houses. The junta also tends to give more “cooperative” ethnic minorities, such as the Wa, administrative control over resources in Shan State. When migrants living in

as a sort of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, in popular discourse, the phrase “without borders” is often construed as a good thing, a phrase that symbolizes our interdependent and interwoven, globalized, social fabric. There are doctors without borders, journalists without borders, clowns without borders. Yet many Shan are effectively state-

WHEN MIGRANTS LIVING IN THAILAND MANAGE TO RECEIVE PERMISSION FROM THEIR EMPLOYERS TO VISIT THEIR FAMILIES IN BURMA, PERHAPS ONCE EVERY FEW YEARS, THEY OFTEN FEEL LOST AT “HOME.”

Thailand manage to receive permission from their employers to visit their families in Burma, perhaps once every few years, they often feel lost at “home.”

In some contexts, the migrants' transnational, fluid identities could be interpreted

less refugees, yearning for the rights and responsibilities that come with a nationality. To them, a secure identity and implicit social contract with an imperfect state – whether in Thailand or Burma – remains more palatable than not being recognized



EMILY HASS, *MAHLERSTRASSE, 8B EXTERIOR 2*. GOUACHE ON PAPER, 19 × 23 INCHES, 2011

at all. They fear that without borders, they belong nowhere. They keep documents like birth certificates, which few of them own, in ziplock bags on the body. In the rare instances when these papers are taken out of their bags, they are unfolded and then refolded like exquisite, fragile onion skin. These papers are often the most precious objects they have, more precious than even the gold jewelry they might possess in lieu of cash or bank accounts.

Because Thailand signed a 2002 repatriation act with Burma and never signed with the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, migrants with an indeterminate status – such as the Shan Burmese children who were born in Thailand but have no documentation – lack almost all typical means to relay concerns, hopes, or grievances via institutionalized channels. In practical terms, “rocking the boat” as non-citizens

also renders them hypervisible and subject to harassment and deportation. Unless they receive exceptional permits from the district or provincial offices, Nuan and her relatives are not allowed to travel or work in another district, or in any occupation than the one listed on their permits: “rock hauler,” “construction worker,” “share-cropper.” The migrants, attached to the employers who sponsor the permits, sometimes become vulnerable to abuse by these employers. When bosses refuse to pay them for their work, for instance, the workers have little recourse in recovering back wages.

ONE YEAR AFTER I met Nuan, the informal school closed, and the children enrolled in local public schools. The local Thais who had taught the students became de facto social workers, cleaning blood off benches, distribut-

ing maxi pads, collecting first bras in the Wednesday market, distributing shoes and uniforms, procuring birth certificates from the District Office. At first, some officials disdained these efforts. One officer scoffed, “Did you know it is illegal to help someone who is not in your family?” There were no lawyers around, much less ones specializing in human rights or immigration law. We were far from a big city, and just far enough from official border refugee camps.

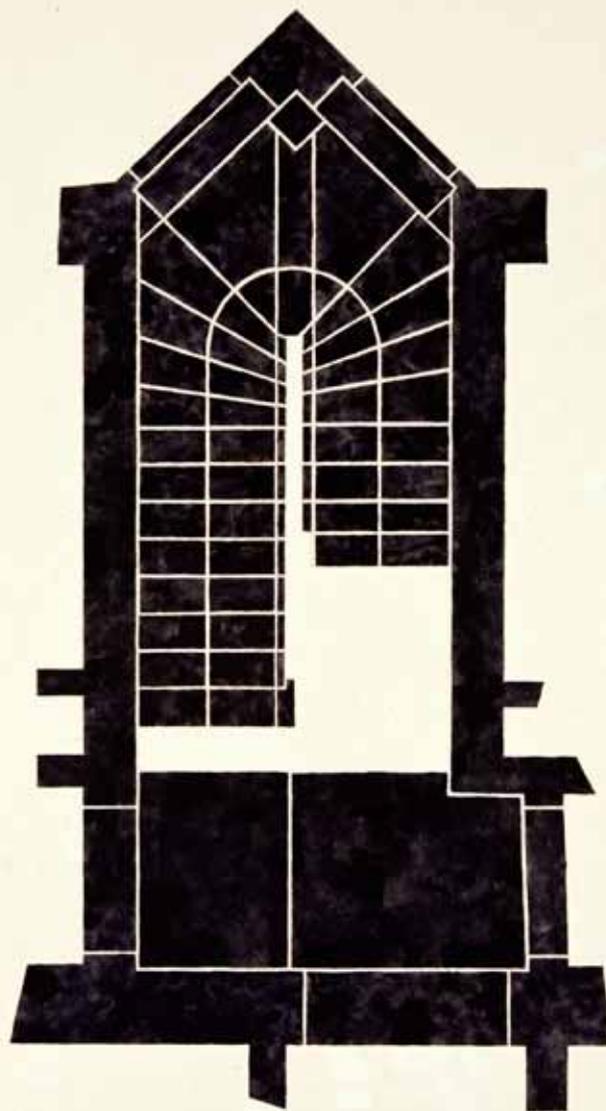
The social workers said that as an academic and as a fund-raiser, I helped to make the BRP “a real NGO,” or nongovernmental organization; they claimed

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that, meanwhile, they were “merely” the “normal workers helping the children.” I felt that this was the wrong conclusion – They were doing the difficult groundwork, day to day. I only gave the project a legitimizing face in the larger NGO world because I had a title and institutional affiliation. I hoped that I also made some substantive contributions beyond writing grants – helping the social workers to re-evaluate their efforts during my month-long visits each year, trying to help them strategically plan for upcoming challenges and seeing beyond that week’s emergency, and researching the models tried elsewhere.

Besides, I wondered, what did it mean to be a “real NGO”? We didn’t have an office or a truck with a logo emblazoned on the doors. What we did have was a shoestring budget of a few thousand dollars a year. This eventually paid for school uniforms and books for more than sixty children who would not be in school otherwise, emergency health-care grants, and on-the-ground workers.

The BRP children thrived in school, often placing first, second, and third in their respective classes. Sometimes teachers lectured the Shan migrant students that even if they were born in Thailand, ate Thai food (a bit spicier than what their parents typically cooked), and spoke Thai fluently, they would never be Thai. No matter that Shan folks are also predominantly Theravada Buddhist, and that they are ↵



EMILY HASS, *WILHELMSAUE STRASSE, 3 STAIRS 5*. GOUACHE ON PAPER, 19 × 23 INCHES, 2011

even often called “Tai Yai,” translated to “big Thai,” in both Burma and Thailand. Other teachers called the excelling BRP students to the front of the room, admonishing the rest of the class by stating, “Look at her! She’s just Shan, and she’s doing better than all of you!” This did not help the students socially. Some local Tai Yai teachers, whose families had lived in Thailand for generations, were much more sympathetic.

Nuan was solidly average in her academic performance, but she demonstrated exceptional emotional resilience. Most of the other Shan children in the community had parents, so Nuan felt acutely alone. Her older sister, Ying, now in her twenties, begrudged Nuan her educational opportunities, which Ying had never received. Sometimes Ying vocalized her envy. Why did Nuan not have to work so many hours hand-making hammocks, as she did? Why was she not financially contributing more to the household? Like almost all the BRP community’s adults, Ying had little idea of what school was like. At first, Ying and other guardians in the community did not understand why it would be difficult for the children to “just work during the garlic harvesting season, and then go back to school and join in at the end of the school year.”

Ying also lamented her lack of privacy, so Ying’s husband, Yo, built Nuan a cubbyhole room, with enough space for a bed, on the side of their bungalow. This helped, but Nuan increasingly spent more time with the social workers and their families. To Nuan, a cubbyhole that was barely one-meter tall helped tremendously, but it was not quite truly a room of her own. There was nowhere to do homework, to listen to music or daydream with abandon, to unwind, to be herself.

Life in Thailand was harder than the sisters had anticipated. Ying noted that back in their Burmese village, she had heard of people moving to Thailand, where work was plentiful, and when they returned to visit, “they looked like rich people, and could buy bicycles or materials for a new house.” These people never told the villagers what kinds of jobs they held in Thailand, nor that so many worked as indentured servants there.

IN THE LARGER POLICY field of international development, I listened to pleas for community-led initiatives, and for meaningful participation by the stakeholders themselves, rather than by outsider con-

sultants and technocrats. With each round of anti-IMF and anti-WTO protests, more prominent policy experts wrote about the futility of “drive-by” trips and “one-size-fits-all” prescriptions for countries as varied as Malawi, Ecuador, and Bangladesh.

The literature suggested that in practice, this increased awareness led to some cases of substantive participation, whereby locals explained to foreign technical experts why some plans were better than others – that is, how and why the new dam would displace more people than developers claimed, that children would not use co-ed bathrooms but would indeed use single-gender ones, or that the new, sophisticated water filtration system would

WHEN SHOULD THE SOCIAL WORKERS TAKE THE LEAD ON NEXT STEPS, AND WHEN SHOULD THE MIGRANTS THEMSELVES DO SO?

not survive without maintenance training for the locals. In many cases, however, aid officers implemented the participation doctrine by hosting a single English-language “hearing” on upcoming changes and potential plans, without translations into local languages or substantive input from local leaders, let alone local marginalized groups – often indigenous or ethnic minorities, women, children, migrants, the poorest.

AND WHAT SHOULD COMMUNITY participation look like in the BRP community? Even seemingly simple tasks like providing potable water proved tricky. The migrants claimed that their water must be fine because it tasted fine, even as our water-testing kits showed that

it was dangerous. When should the social workers take the lead on next steps, and when should the migrants themselves do so? For instance, the community had no sanitation whatsoever when the BRP began to work with them. They defecated in the same river they bathed and worked in. We provided money to purchase porcelain for toilets and concrete for outhouses. We wondered about paying them to construct the latrines. According to the academic literature, to not pay them could be exploitation, but to pay them could constitute coercion. After all, at the time they earned roughly a dollar a day doing hard manual labor, and weren’t in the position to turn down paid work. Theory can provide guidelines as to possible strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, but it gives no answers. In this case, the migrant workers were proud to draw upon their construction skills, and they did not want to be paid to improve their own homes.

Outside obvious basic infrastructural initiatives, we soon discovered that because most BRP community members were neither official refugees nor exactly voluntary migrants, our work was affected in major ways. For instance, the most egregious problems and deprivations from which the refugees suffered did not stem from overt, state-perpetrated violent conflict but from structural violence – physical and mental harm that results from unjust social, economic, and political structures. They would complain of severe back pain, or of blindness, or of terrible phantom pains in their lost limbs and digits. Many of the prescriptions that would treat their ailments – such as sharing a wheelbarrow so that the refugees did not have to carry fifty-kilo bags of rice on their shoulders, or providing sunglasses to treat pterygium (a scar on the eyes caused by sun damage) – fall outside typical medical practice. ☞

Beginning with a series based on her father’s (since demolished) Berlin childhood home from which he fled in 1938, Emily Hass uses archival architectural records to create drawings that explore the loss of three dimensional space and the passage of time. She has expanded the work to include the former homes of other Berlin Jews and persecuted artistic and cultural luminaries of the 1930s, including Anni Albers, Otto Dix, Else Ury, Walter Benjamin, Johannes Itten, and Ruth Vollmer. In this series she uses architecture as a language through which to represent identity, loss, and place. Selections of her Berlin project were exhibited in *Heimatkunde* at the Jewish Museum Berlin and are now part of the museum’s permanent collection. Hass is a 2012 grant recipient from the New York Foundation for the Arts and will be an artist-in-residence at the Millay Colony for the Arts later this year, and at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in early 2013. She lives and works in New York City.

One recent challenge lay in tackling mental health issues. Luckily, most of the refugees in our community were not victims of rape or village burnings themselves, and generally, the students were doing well in school. We could see them holding hands and playing together easily. Still, when we evaluated the children’s mental health, the results were sobering. As compared to “normal” Thai children, while the

the social workers saw an increase in so-called “social pathologies,” and strikingly, they are the same sorts I’ve witnessed in other severely marginalized communities, including those in the United States: teen pregnancy, gambling (card-playing instead of the off-track betting commonly seen in large American cities), and drug abuse, especially with alcohol and yaabaa (literally, “crazy drug”), a mixture of meth-

to make long-term future plans. Instead of saving money, they bought fancy new motorbikes, making fun of the old ones owned by the BRP social workers.

AFTER NUAN BECAME A teenager, she felt less and less comfortable at home. Eventually, because Nuan’s situation rendered her one of the community’s neediest cases, the BRP helped her to enroll in a boarding school in a larger city, where her grades improved dramatically. She struggles in some subjects, such as trigonometry, partly because the quality of her previous schooling was rather poor. However, her conversational skills in English and Mandarin Chinese (which she learns alongside Thai, as is standard in many private schools there) are quite impressive.

After the original social workers left and new staff came to work at the BRP in 2010, Nuan stated that I was one of the most permanent people in her life and began to call me “Mama.” I inhaled sharply, baffled and grateful, marveling at what, exactly, I had done to be judged a parent. There was no labor, there were no pains, and yet – each

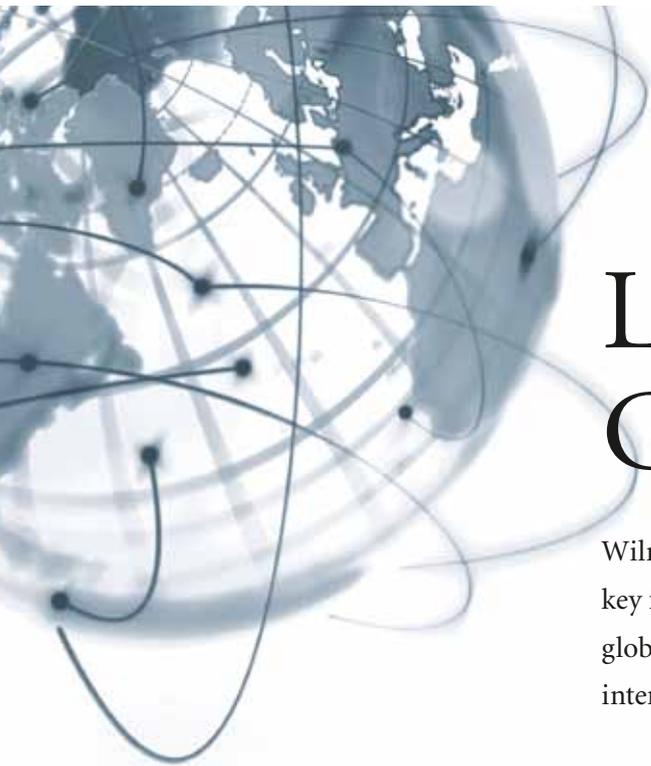
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refugee children reported much lower rates of attention deficit disorder-related behaviors, they had much more difficulty in peer bonding. Interestingly, for both mental and physical health, BRP community members have scored better than known refugee populations, but worse than voluntary migrant populations.

In the last six or seven years, the larger area in which the BRP community resides has experienced a boom in tourism and economic development. Simultaneously,

amphetamine and caffeine. One teenage girl ran off with an older male neighbor who’d showered her with attention, and she became pregnant while taking one birth control pill every two days to save money, even though a social worker had spoken to her about family planning.

The families that remained sharecroppers stayed poor, but the ones that worked as day laborers in construction saw their incomes rise dramatically. Few of them have bank accounts, however, or the skills



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gesture I made, however small to me, seemed to take on great emotional weight, to signify care and possibility to her. Before this moment, I had not fully grasped the consequences of my trips to Thailand, the full range of joy (and vulnerability) inherent in the fact that my role there was not defined by me alone. With each unprompted Facebook message assuring me that she will work hard to stay in school, to deserve my care, to “be a good person,” I reevaluate what it means for me to be a good person, a good mother – however unconventionally so – to Nuan.

In some ways, because of her stunting from early malnutrition, Nuan appears to be much younger than she is. And whenever we meet and traverse city streets, even as she adeptly protects me from careless drivers and motorcyclists, she holds my hand and does not let go for hours. A couple of years ago, Nuan proudly announced that she had a gift for me, and I feared her splurging on something expensive. I need not have worried. She presented me with a glass jar filled with tiny, ornate hand-folded origami stars, each one representing a wish for me to make, each one to be fulfilled.

Usually, in research, I have a hypothesis to test, a research question to investigate, or a comparative analysis to conduct. At the Burmese Refugee Project, I learned about working with the ever-changing, the nebulous – the need for a range of outcomes, with a variety of time ranges, and the need for constant reflection, or praxis. I learned there was no such thing as a set of best practices, only good ones, and that I enjoyed conducting interviews and participant observation much more than running statistical regressions on height and weight. The latter is what the community needed most sometimes, however.

I HAVE WITNESSED HOW NUAN'S QUIET INSISTENCE THAT SHE BELONGS – AND THAT EACH OF US BELONGS WITH HER – HAVE PUT TO REST ANY FURTHER QUESTIONS THE TEACHERS AND MONKS MIGHT HAVE RAISED.

I also learned that it was crucial to take the migrants' agency as seriously as their structural constraints. The year after the BRP introduced outhouses to the community, the social workers found out that the migrants had built additional latrines without having asked for any money, even for materials. At first, the migrants had not been sure they wanted the toilets, but their

expectations had clearly changed. Was it because of public health reasons? For privacy? As a status symbol? In such cases, the process of participation – diagnosing the problem of lack of sanitation, pooling resources, making choices on next steps, brainstorming, and following through, most often with financial help and access to experts – was as important as the specific results and content of individual endeavors. Sometimes the community initiated plans, such as electricity-sharing schemes with sliding-scale payment schedules that the staff members may not have formed on their own.

Thus, one of the most serendipitous surprises, and biggest challenge for us, has been in finding and nurturing the community members' sense of entitlement and their so-called “right to have rights.” At first, abstract rights felt to them like the intellectual playground of the privileged, of democracy activists and dissidents living far away in Scandinavia and North America. Lately, however, we have been hearing a lot more talk from the refugees about how they want the rights afforded to those around them. The teenagers have asked the social workers for workshops on drug abuse, self-esteem, and environmental issues. I have also seen the children not only voice their dreams but make these dreams bigger, wishing for Burma “to have a democracy, like Thailand,” in explicit ways I had not heard before.

THE MIGRANTS REPEATEDLY TALK about wanting “to be happy, have jobs, and get money from [their] jobs.” Years ago, when we first began to ask the children to write essays on “what I want to be when I grow up,” the answers were always the same: the boys wanted

to be soldiers, and the girls wanted to be teachers. One five-year-old boy had already internalized popular discourse about Shan migrants in Thailand as criminals, writing about how he wanted to grow up and “arrest all of the bad Shan drug dealers. But this will make their mothers very, very sad, because they know that their sons are not really evil.” More recently, the teenag-

ers have expressed a much wider range of goals, from becoming a tour guide to becoming a graphic designer and making T-shirts. In some ways, these seemingly pedestrian aspirations strike me as even more radical than wanting to become, say, a political activist – they reflect a sense of palpable possibility, real ownership over what one wishes to and may become.

NUAN INTRODUCES ME AS her mother, without caveats or explanations, wherever we go – to teachers at her school and to Buddhist monks when she takes me to temples to present offerings and pray with her. The teachers and monks often look bewildered at first. “Where is she from?” they ask her, referring to me. “Around,” she answers. I have witnessed how Nuan's quiet insistence that she belongs – and that each of us belongs with her – have put to rest any further questions they might have raised. Nuan often acts as my interpreter, since my Thai skills remain limited, as well as my cultural translator – telling me what to write on the envelopes with offerings at the temple, what movements to make in the rituals. I listen to her Mandarin teacher praise her handwriting skills, to her English teacher express concern over her health.

Nuan and I speak in a mishmash of Thai-Chinglish, which to me renders us a real, if unconventional, family. This year, she is a senior in high school. Next year, she will be the first Shan Burmese migrant in her community and, perhaps, her entire hometown in Burma to graduate from high school. If she passes her college entrance exams, she will most certainly be the first one to attend university.

Immigration policy pundits sometimes evoke the Swiss playwright and novelist Max Frisch's famous quip: “We wanted workers; we got people instead.” They do this to highlight disjunctures between ill-formed policies and the nitty-gritty messiness of real life. My decade of experience with the BRP (where, indeed, few of the community's households can be adequately described as voluntary migrant workers) has impressed upon me, again and again, the extent to which this messiness is a gift. 🐾

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