

Asian Freedom Film Festival 2006

by Aileen Familara

Using film as an alternative medium to put its message across, specifically to mainstream issues of migrant workers in the Southeast Asian region, was the goal of the first Asian Freedom Film Festival. In spite of the threat of a storm and the cancellation of the ASEAN Leaders Summit, the festival pushed through from December 10 to 12, 2006 in Cebu, Philippines.

The festival sought to use images and films in bringing about greater awareness on migrants' human rights issues in the region. Leading migrants' rights advocates, human rights activists, government officials, civil society delegates, students, and film makers from the region were invited to take part in the event.

In particular, the film festival sought to:

1. Raise awareness on the issues and problems faced by migrant workers both at the country of origin and destination
2. Promote the recognition of migrant domestic workers as workers, particularly uphold the rights of migrant domestic workers in terms of the following:

- Right to form and join associations and unions

- Right to keep their travel and identity documents (passports, IDs)
- Right to have a holiday or day off at least once a week and on public holidays
- Right to a standard contract that adheres to International Labour Organisation (ILO) decent work agenda, the Migrant Workers Convention, and the various human rights mechanisms that protect and promote the rights of migrant workers
- Right to be paid on time
- Right to non-discrimination and equal pay for equal work

3. Raise awareness on the social cost of migration



4. Promote migrants' right to health and well-being, specifically:

- Right to access health and reproductive health care
- Right to accurate and timely information with regard to prevention and access to health care in relation to HIV/AIDS

This three-day event was jointly organised by the Migrant Forum in Asia, an organisation dedicated in advocating the rights of migrants in the region, and Pusat Kommas, a centre that promotes popular communication tools in working with the communities. The event was also supported by the Freedom from Debt Coalition-Cebu Chapter, Miriam College Migration Studies Program, and the South East Asian Committee for Advocacy.

The Festival

With the theme “Women and Migration in the ASEAN,” various films delving on the issues faced by women migrants in the region were featured. The event also served as a platform in discussing migration issues in the region at present.

The opening film, “Don't Fence Me In: Major Mary and the Karen Refugees,” is a 30-minute documentary which chronicles the life of freedom fighter Major Mary On and reveals the courage and determination of the Karen refugees living in the Thai-Burma border as they fight for their survival.

With the Burmese struggles being centre of attention on the first day, panelists consisting of Philippine representative Mario Joyo Aguja, Debbie Stothard of Altsean-Burma, and Charm Tong of Shan Women's Action Network helped to further clarify the situation in Burma. The audience took part in the discussion by sharing their similar personal experiences and their hopes in seeing ASEAN unite in these struggles.

During the festival's last day, the following winning films were awarded:

- 1) “Kunyang” by Vivian Limpin from the Philippines. The film documents the alienation, distance, movement, dreams, and aspirations of women migrant workers from the Philippines.
- 2) “House of Despair, Park of Hope” from Hong Kong, talks about how Indonesian women migrant domestic workers survive the hardships of working in Hong Kong despite issues such as abuse and underpayment from their employers.
- 3) “Suicide Jumpers” by Herbert Docena from the Philippines, which showed that around 30,000 to 50,000 Filipino migrant workers – most of them female domestic helpers – were subjected to ‘collective punishment’ in August 2006 in Israel because of the Lebanon bombing.

These films were the three winning story proposals to which the Migrant Forum in Asia awarded a grant of \$1,000 to turn their concepts into films. The three films were premiered during the film festival in Cebu.





The Films



FlickerFest International Short Film Festival, Sydney, Australia, 2005
Slamdance Film Festival, Utah, 2005
Association for Asian Studies Conference, San Francisco, 2006
8th Annual Artfest Film Festival, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2006
Society for Visual Anthropology/American Anthropological Association Conference, San Jose, California, 2006

Don't Fence Me In: Major Mary and the Karen Refugees from Burma

Directed by Ruth Gummit

Produced by Documentary Educational Resources

Since 1962, Burma has been ruled by a military junta. Life has deteriorated markedly for its citizens. Despite its former prosperity and all its rich resources, it was voted least developed nation by the UN in 1987, and human rights atrocities continue to prevail. Forced from their homes by the government, more than 100,000 people live in refugee camps along the border between Burma and Thailand; hundreds of thousands more hide in jungles on the Burma side. They are the Karen people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Burma.

Don't Fence Me In chronicles the life of 70-year-old freedom fighter Major Mary On and her people's struggle for self-determination. Mary explains how the Karen are fighting for their very survival; the Burmese military's goal is "to wipe the Karen away so if you want to see them you'll have to go see them in the museum. See just an image or picture." Her charismatic storytelling is accompanied by rare, clandestine footage smuggled out of the Karen refugee camps.

She illuminates the plight of the Karen still inside Burma, having little food and hiding in the jungle, yet proving

remarkably resilient. While the Karen have lost their land, their way of life, and many of those who lived and fought beside them for independence, they have not lost their ties to a rich and beautiful history that transcends their present day despair. The film reveals the Karen refugees' spirit and determination to survive as political and historical forces conspire against them. *Don't Fence Me In* is an eloquent and moving chronicle of human rights abuses that must finally be brought to the attention of the global community.

Leave Home to Survive / Child Labourers From Burma

Supported by ILO - ACTRAV

Documentary on the plight of Burmese migrant workers and child labourers from Burma.



Screenings / Awards:

Worldwide Short Film Festival, Toronto, Canada, May 2004

Finalist - Short Film and Video Competition, USA Film Festival, Dallas, Texas, 2004

Cracow Film Festival, Poland, 2004

Frame By Frame HBO Documentary Film Series, San Francisco, 2004

26th Annual IFP Market, New York, 2004

B.A.T.A.M

Directed by Liam Dalzell, Per Erik Eriksson, and Johan Lindquist

Produced by Motordoc

B.A.T.A.M. tells the contrasting stories of two women: Wati, a young factory worker, and Dewi, a prostitute, both of whom live through a dramatic transformation on the Indonesian island of Batam, located on



Singapore's doorstep. In this free-trade zone, an official economy based in the factories, and an unofficial economy of prostitution, have developed together increasing Batam's population from 3,000 to 700,000. As the two divergent economies depend on female labour, the experiences of these two women illuminate the ways in which multinational capitalism and migration interact in the shadowlands of globalisation.

Screenings:

Nordic Anthropological Film Association Ethnographic Film Festival, 2005

UNIFEM Singapore, 2005

Award of Excellence, Society for Visual Anthropology, American Anthropological Association Conference, Washington DC, 2005

Association for Asian Studies Conference, San Francisco, 2006

Festival of Visual Culture, Finland, 2006



Kunyang

Directed by Vivian Limpin

Produced by MEA and Land Bridge Productions

Kunyang focuses on women migrant workers from the Philippines; women being the bigger percentage of migrant workers and work being their primary reason for migration to outside the country.

This film is a lyrical documentary on the lives of these women migrant workers, as told by them. We will hear the voices of women interviewees, as they talk of their dreams, aspirations, hopes, and fears. We will hear a lot of different women voices talking of the same experience of wanting and working for a better life. We will hear the voices of people affected by this experience, husbands, daughters, sons and parents. We will see images of

alienation, distance, movement, dreams, and aspirations. There will be play of shadows and light, of waves, of things leaving and things that just left.

This short film is in collaboration with two other filmmaker-animators from the Department of Film and Audio-Visual Communication from the College of Mass Communications of the University of the Philippines, Katrin Maria Diokno Escay and Maria Katrin Loreños.

Suicide Jumpers: Heroes in a Modern Day War

Produced by Migrant Forum in Asia and Focus on the Global South

In August 2006, Israel rained thousands of bombs on Lebanon. Along with the rest of the Lebanese people, between 30,000 to 50,000 Filipino migrant workers – most of them female domestic helpers – were subjected to what international law considers “collective punishment.” In the course of the thirty-day bombardment, more than ten Filipinos would jump off from buildings. With many prevented from leaving by their employers, hundreds more would run away, many in the dead of night and under the stars and bombs. Fleeing from Israeli bombs or from abusive employers or both, it was – for some – a choice between death and death. Their destination: a Catholic school turned evacuation processing center for all those hoping to get repatriated. With many employers running after them and forcing them to return to their households, the school was at once both a refuge and a temporary shelter. Over 4,000 Filipinos would eventually wound up here, waiting for the next bus home.

Suicide Jumpers: Heroes in a Modern Day War tells the story of some of those who chose to jump, to run away, and ended up in this centre. There's Miramar, who, barred by her employers from leaving, chose to jump from their second floor balcony instead. There's Jezebel who also took the leap, her legs now in cast, her face swollen. There's Jonalyn, who, after asking for permission to leave, was beaten up by the entire family she was working for and thrown out, barely conscious, into a garbage dump. There's Mary Jane, whose employers managed to catch up with her in the

centre and who were demanding that she returns with them. There's Chona, who had just reached the centre and who's crying profusely, terrified that her employers would manage to get her back. There's also Rina and the many other who, instead of immediately leaving, chose to volunteer at the centre and take care of their fellow domestic workers. With many made to work in miserable conditions from 5am to midnight seven days a week for \$150 a month, vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, they have been called "modern-day slaves" by some observers.

This is the story of these "modern-day slaves" in a modern-day war. There are scenes of fear and courage, as Filipinas finally reach the centre after their perilous and uncertain escape. There are scenes of solitude and solidarity, as workers who had often worked alone and isolated in their own households find and comfort each other. There are also scenes of despair and redemption, as the "modern-day slaves" – ironically made more resilient by the terror of war – finally find the courage to say no to their masters and cast off their slavery. But even that is countered by a sense of futility and hopelessness: As the Filipinos line up for their buses, one of them mockingly taunts them, "You think you'll be away for long? You'll be back soon!"

NOTE: Footage for this documentary was shot in Beirut, Lebanon during the war last August 10-12, 2006. Interviews during that trip became the basis of a story published by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism i-Report entitled, "The Jumpy Ladies of Lebanon," last August 27, 2006.



House of Despair, Park of Hope

Directed by Amardeep Kaur Gill

Produced by Video Power in association with IMWU and KOTHKIHO

In 2005, as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) held its Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong, the women migrant workers formed the largest body of protestors. Yet, these female migrants remained under-represented in media coverage. Furthermore, migrants had to struggle with employers for days off and for joining the activities

surrounding MC6. However, despite the challenges, grassroots organising for alternatives and raising awareness by migrant workers was a big success. The resistance against WTO was more than just a struggle against its policies, it was a fight for rights.

The documentary aims to bring in the everyday experience of Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. It will show interviews with migrant workers at their workplaces, such as markets, and also interview women at shelter to expose the harsh conditions of their work.

House of Despair, Park of Hope will expose how domestic workers become part of human trafficking in which movement is controlled through strategic ways. Employers and agents often create fear in the migrants workers and put conditions on their freedom to move, thus, hindering them from organising, creating trade unions, going out to advocacy training workshops and so on.

Between the Lines

Directed by Dr. Parvez Imam

New Delhi (the capital of India) witnessed a number of arrests of "illegal" or undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh during 2000 and even later. Many of them were kept in detention for long periods. Many families were separated and many were deported. However the Bangladesh authorities claim that they are not aware of these deportations.

The film is about the lives of people disowned by either sides of the line called border.

Home Bound and Miggy Migrante

Distributed by Asian Migrant Centre

The film documents the lives of Filipino women migrant workers from Hong Kong. One of the women interviewed shares her story as a returnee migrant worker from Hong Kong. Some of the women were interviewed in their workplace in Hong Kong. The women interviewed in the film are part of the Savings and Reintegration group organised by the Asian Migrant Centre in Hong Kong.

Breaking Labour

Directed by Elnora Ebillo

Produced by TENAGANITA Women's Force



Malaysia's rapid economic growth in recent decades

has spawned an unbridled recruitment of migrant workers numbering up to three million. This documentary film traces the migrant workers who suffered in detention camps in Malaysia and tells the stories of those who are still struggling in Malaysia seeking for justice. It reveals the dreams of potential migrant workers and their hopes for a better life. It chronicles the quest for survival in and out of detention camps of migrant workers from Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia.

Temporary Loss of Consciousness

Directed by Monica Bhasin

The film crisscrosses the boundaries of internal and external spaces of people in exile. It explores displacement and the futility of borders in the conditions created by partition of the Indian subcontinent during and after 1974.

Temporary Loss of Consciousness alludes to the recurring displacement of populations in the Indian subcontinent from the time of the partition (1974) up to present. The film explores the ideas of borders, boundaries, limits and forbidden spaces that generate vast expansion of wastelands of human emotion and action. Treated as poetic essay, the film traces these ideas through the voices of those who live in exile in the Indian subcontinent. It has been shot in New Delhi apart from the borders of India – Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

Uprooted

Produced by National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Uprooted: Refugees of the Global Economy is a compelling documentary about how the global economy has forced people to leave their home countries. *Uprooted* presents three stories of immigrants who left their homes in Bolivia, Haiti, and the Philippines after global economic powers devastated their countries, only to face new challenges in the United States. These powerful stories raise critical questions about US immigration policy in an era when corporations cross borders at will.

This documentary weaves together the stories of three immigrants into a compelling tale of how the global economy

(including US corporations and the International Monetary Fund) has forced immigrants to leave their home countries. Maricel is one of thousands of women encouraged by the Philippine government to work abroad as a domestic in order to pay its international debt. Her employer, a top New York corporate executive, refused to pay her the minimum wage. Free trade destroyed Jessy and Jaime's family business in Bolivia; they came to the United States and worked as janitors despite their engineering degrees. Luckner left Haiti after working for 14 cents an hour at a US-owned baseball factory that moved to China, in search of cheaper labor costs.

Citations:

Nominated for a 2002 Northern California Emmy Award for Current Affairs programming

Finalist for the World Hunger Year's 2002 Harry Chapin Media Award for innovative coverage of hunger and poverty issues

Best of the Fest at CineAccion's Cine Latino Festival, 2002

Sowing Seeds

Directed by Avic Ilagan

Produced by Blacksoup, Inc.

A documentary on the lives of women migrant workers in Japan who are married to Japanese men. A first deceiving look leads one to believe that *Sowing Seeds* is just another one of those sociological studies on Asian Brides. But, the film is less about Yamagata wives than about the filmmakers own identity crisis. In her eyes, the modest but resilient Filipinas in the film transform from being the subject of a study to active agents who unintentionally revert the gaze.

Silent Cries: The Untold Stories of Migrant Workers in Malaysia

Produced by Pusat Komus

The film chronicles the lives of undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia.

Sources:

Asian Freedom Film Festival 2006, <<http://asianfreedomfilmfest.blogspot.com/>>

Migrant Forum in Asia, <<http://www.mfasia.org/>>