

ASIA WITHOUT BORDERS

NO. 118  
ISSUE 3/2016

# ASIAN Geographic™



## A Woman's World

India's Pink War  
Leaena the Lioness  
Diana, Totem of Her Generation

SIIN 5007/50 (MINH G.S.)  
MAWAR 16 • THAI THB220  
RUB BN18-80 • INDID70.00  
PPI 5/96/70/70/3/20/6/94

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Issue 3 | 2016



www.asiangeographic.com  
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978-962-623-220-0

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# *Before the World Was Made*

By William Butler Yeats

If I make the lashes dark  
And the eyes more bright  
And the lips more scarlet,  
Or ask if all be right  
From mirror after mirror,  
No vanity's displayed:  
I'm looking for the face I had  
Before the world was made.

What if I look upon a man  
As though on my beloved,  
And my blood be cold the while  
And my heart unmoved?  
Why should he think me cruel  
Or that he is betrayed?  
I'd have him love the thing that was  
Before the world was made.

---

◆

**WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS** (1865–1939) was an Irish poet, playwright and cultural leader. Born in Dublin, he was educated in London before returning to Dublin at the age of fifteen. Yeats was involved with the Celtic Revival, a movement which sought to promote Ireland's native heritage and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923.

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# Fabulously Female!

A touch of femininity at Hotel Clover

Female travellers need not worry in this day and age, for modern technologies and creative inventions exist for added security. In big metropolises like Bangkok, Hotel Clover Asoke's brand new all-ladies floor serves to do just that.

The latest in Hotel Clover's already growing suite of hotels in Singapore, this Bangkok property is located on Sukhumvit 16, just a 400-metre short walk from Asoke BTS Skytrain and Terminal 21 Shopping Mall, one of Bangkok's hippest and largest shopping malls with hundreds of stores offering fashion glitz and scrumptious food.

With a tagline like "Simplicity in Luxury", Hotel Clover Asoke's outdoor pool, free wi-fi coverage all round and rooftop bar



with a restaurant and amazing views of the city centre by night will ensure this is one perfect girly getaway.

Besides, the rooms are vibrantly decorated in everything from 70s pop art to haute couture to soft florals. Be it for business or leisure, this is the place to book yourself into after a full days' worth of work or play.

If Bangkok is a bit too far from home, Hotel Clover 33 Jalan Sultan in Singapore is a serene urban sanctuary located on the fringe of Bugis. The spacious Loft Suites include a quad room with two queen beds that can accommodate up to four travellers – which makes this place perfect for a snug staycation with your friends and for all ladies travelling together.

With its nature-inspired features set in a heritage neighbourhood, there's much to explore around Haji Lane and Arab Street. After a hot and humid day of sightseeing around Singapore, Hotel Clover 33 Jalan Sultan is the place to find refuge as it is truly an urban sanctuary.



Hotel Clover The Arts on South Bridge Road is another fine option, with brightly-hued rooms tailored with a feminine touch that is sure to please any female traveller.

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GOLD

SILVER

BRONZE

NO. 118 • ISSUE 3/2016

## DEPARTMENTS



### NATURE

#### 48 Land Before Time

New moth species discovered in Aceh, Indonesia

The discovery of a new moth species, the *Endoclita fahringeri*, in the mountains of Gunung Leuser in Sumatera, Indonesia, is proving to be a landmark in scientific history. The 300 million-year-old mountain range is where Alfred Fahringer discovered the species during his two-week trek in August 2014. He narrates his experience exclusively to *ASIAN Geographic*.

BY ALFRED FAHRINGER

### CULTURE

#### 62 Freya Stark, the

Passionate Nomad  
One woman's influence on  
the Arab world

Dubbed the female Lawrence of Arabia, Dame Freya Stark (1893–1993) was one of her generation's most prolific female explorers, travelling through Syria, Iran, Iraq, Yemen and other Middle Eastern countries prior to the second world war. Here, we chart her influence and the roads she paved for others following in her footsteps.

BY SOPHIE IBBOTSON

### ON ASSIGNMENT

#### 68 Women of Gaza

A life choked with adversity along the Gaza Strip

As with all Palestinians in what is often described as the world's largest open air prison, life for the women of the Gaza Strip is choked with adversity. But journalist and photographer Lara Abu Ramadan strives to show Gaza's human face to a world used to seeing scenes of catastrophe and violence.

BY NIGEL O'CONNOR

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by William Butler Yeats

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Tears and Triumphs of  
the 2003 Iraq War

*ASIAN Geographic* pays  
tribute to Alexandra  
Boulat, one of the world's  
most fearless female  
photojournalists and war  
documentary photographers.  
Her series of photos taken  
during the invasion of Iraq  
to topple Saddam Hussein's  
regime shows us the tears  
and triumphs of war through  
the lives of civilians.

BY ALEXANDRA BOULAT

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The greatest of Georgian  
rulers

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THE WOMAN BEHIND THE DRESS; THE SYLVIA KHO EXHIBIT AT SINGAPORE'S PERANAKAN MUSEUM. PHOTO © JUSTIN ONG

### FEATURE

#### 22 A Totem of Her Generation

Exploring women's identities through Diana Lui's photography

In this exclusive interview with *ASIAN Geographic*, Paris-based photographer Diana Lui speaks to us about the artistic and anthropological nature of her work, as seen through the large format portraits of modern-day women in Morocco, Tunisia and Malaysia. Taken on her 8x10 inch view camera, her portraits seek to explore the meaning and identity of contemporary Asian women.

BY WAN PHING LIM

### COVER STORY

#### 38 India's Pink War

The fight against women's violence

They wear pink saris, wield sticks and don't hesitate to use violence in their fight for women's rights. These are the ladies of the Gulabi Gang, an association created by Sampat Pal Devi to eradicate gender violence in India, one of the countries in the world where women are often discriminated against even before birth. Founded in 2006, members who are mostly victims of domestic abuse now number over 400,000 across India.

BY ZIGOR ALDAMA AND MIGUEL CANDELA

### FEATURE

#### 52 Who was Sylvia?

Remembering Singapore's Renaissance woman, Sylvia Kho (1917–2013)

In appreciation and retrospective on Singapore's foremost bridal couturier and innovator in the arts of fashion, beauty and decoration, Sylvia Kho created a whole new industry centred around one of society's most important rites of passage – the institution of marriage. A trendsetter and pioneering businesswoman, we look at her life and legacy.

BY KHONG SWEE LIN

### ON THE COVER

"Gulabi Gang members in their fight against domestic violence and abuse in India" by Jonas Gratzer/Getty



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## { EDITOR'S NOTE }



Photo © Miguel Candela

Sayah Bana joined the Gulabi Gang after being abused by her husband

### "One should never strike a woman, not even with a flower."

— Hindu, Janet, i.8

striking a woman, resulting in women striking back and forming an alliance known as the Gulabi Gang in India, is the cover story of our issue this month. Even as we celebrate Mother's Day on 8 May and honour the women in our lives, we highlight the plight of those who are not as fortunate as ourselves.

In the next few pages, you'll see some of the most heartbreakingly photos of Iraqi civilians through the 2003 invasion (in our homage to Alexandra Boulat, one of the world's most courageous female photojournalists). We remember the comfort women who were forced into sexual slavery under Japan's Imperial Army (p.94) and take a look at life as a working woman in the Gaza Strip (p.70).

But not all is lost. We partner with the United Nations to highlight the stories that shed hope to a broken and imperfect world. Also, there are female "Kings" in Georgia, female solo explorers to the Middle East, female champions of the disabled, female trendsetters, female portraitists; all pioneers and totems of their generation.

Regardless of gender or sex, we hope you enjoy this issue.

  
WAN PHING

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#### CORRECTIONS

In our previous issue No.117 (Issue 2/2016) we incorrectly printed on p.33 the abbreviation of Singapore Youth for Climate Action as SCYA. The correct text should read SYCA. On p.33 a quote was unintentionally left out of the paragraph that states: "Singapore's INDC states that it intends to reduce its emissions intensity by 36% from 2005 levels by 2030." The full sentence should include: "... and to stabilise emissions with the aim of peaking around 2030." On p.37 the last quote "We believe that a person who wants action will only be ready to do so with the right resources..." was wrongly attributed to the National Climate Change Secretariat (NCCS) of Singapore. The quote should be attributed to the SYCA.

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**ASIAN Geographic** is published every 45 days by Asian Geographic Magazines Pte Ltd 20 Bedok South Road, Singapore 469277 • **SINGAPORE** Tel: +(65) 6298 3241 Fax: +(65) 6291 2068 • Email: [hello@asiangeo.com](mailto:hello@asiangeo.com)  
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PICTURESQUE





# Iraq through the Fall

TEARS AND TRIUMPHS OF THE 2003 IRAQ INVASION

---

By Alexandra Boulat

On 20 March 2003, US army tanks rolled into Baghdad to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein. The siege that lasted over a month left close to 10,000 civilians dead and would herald turmoil for Iraq over the next eight years.





**OPENING SPREAD** Foreign Arab fighters at a military camp south of Baghdad, training to fight alongside Iraqi soldiers (6 June 2006)

**ABOVE LEFT** Men with guns wander around in the haze as Baghdad is covered in an ominous red glow after a sandstorm (25 March 2003)

**LEFT** Iraqis dig up victims in an effort to identify their relatives in a cemetery near Abu Ghraib jail (28 April 2003)

**ABOVE** A military parade in Tikrit, north of Baghdad, a few weeks before the coalition forces invaded Iraq (15 February 2003)

**RIGHT** Women carry looted goods as they run down the streets of Baghdad (10 April 2003)

**BELOW** Children gather in a school in Basra a few days before the US invasion of Iraq (15 February 2003)

**FAR RIGHT** US soldiers pull down a statue of Saddam Hussein at Ramadan Square (9 April 2003)

**BELOW RIGHT** Two women bathe the body of their 12-year-old relative killed by air strikes (29 March 2003)

One woman stood outside a mosque, asking "Can I go in?". She did not know what lay behind those doors, but as she was ushered into a stark room, she saw two women bathing the body of a 12-year-old girl in preparation for her burial. Behind this photo, and others capturing the Iraq invasion between February and April 2003, is the late French photojournalist Alexandra Boulat

---

**Boulat's photos were instantly recognisable for their witness to human folly and courage**





(1962–2007), who after studying graphic art in Paris, packed a camera bag for the Balkans and never looked back.

Assignments in Croatia, Kosovo and Bosnia during the 1990s would pave the way for her photojournalism career, and largely influenced by her father, LIFE photographer Pierre Boulat, Alexandra is today celebrated for her award-winning photos of conflict and women in Iraq, Afghanistan and Gaza.

*ASIAN Geographic* pays tribute to this fearless photojournalist and documentary photographer – who through this series of photos, taken before, during and after the Iraq invasion of March 2003 – shows us the triumphs and tears of war. ♦ AG

---

ALEXANDRA BOULAT was a photojournalist best known for her photos documenting the war in Iraq, Afghanistan and Gaza. She co-founded the VII Photo Agency.  
[www.pierrealexandraboulat.com](http://www.pierrealexandraboulat.com)

Iraqis celebrate the removal of Saddam Hussein's statues by pulling the head of the statue around the city (9 April 2003)





# Becoming Snow White

MEETING BEAUTY IDEALS IN THE EAST AND WEST

Text Kathy Poh

**Fairness** has always been synonymous with beauty in China. Today, apart from the proliferation of whitening products, stranger trends such as face-kinis (balaclava-like sun shields) have even emerged. But the pursuit and preservation of white skin can be traced back to ancient times, where paintings and poetry depicted images of the ideal woman having skin the colour of snow.

Although such an enduring perception seems to be perpetually unfair towards tanned Chinese women, ways to obtain a lighter complexion

have been around since the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

The highly influential *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (also known as the *Compendium of Materia Medica*) was a traditional Chinese medical book that recommended eating peas for paler and more lustrous skin. Other medical reference books also had recipes for herbal concoctions like the Three Whites Soup, which has the additional benefit of curing typhoid fever.

If natural methods were inadequate, there were also artificial means through which one could undergo a

facelift. This was mainly through the use of cosmetic powder, which has its origins during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC).

Just like the white powder used by Japanese geishas, the ancient Chinese cosmetic powder was made of rice. Later on, pearls and rare spices were also added into the mix, as it was believed that crushed pearls gave skin a luminous glow.

Fast forward a few hundred years, and rice and pearl continue to be popular ingredients in whitening products. While face-kinis may not take the world by storm, the ancient Chinese were indeed pioneers of the cosmetics industry.



{ CHINA }

**A**t one point in Shakespeare's Othello, the Duke of Venice praises Othello the Moorish prince for being "far more fair than black". Here, there is an underlying connotation of fairness being associated with beauty and goodness – but while it reflects stereotypes in this fictional world, the same sentiment also existed during the Elizabethan era in England (1558–1603).

Pale skin was a sign of one's aristocracy, for it meant that an individual did not need to labour under the hot, skin-tanning sun. Beauty during this era was embodied by none other than Queen Elizabeth I herself, who was said to have pale, porcelain-

like skin. She was a figure whom other women modelled themselves after.

To get the Queen's look, raw egg white was often applied over one's face to create a glazed complexion. Some women even resorted to using leeches to drain their blood in order to obtain pale skin.

Other beauty rituals with more lasting effects came with high prices. For those who could afford it, one of the most common skin-whitening products was ceruse, a mixture of white lead and vinegar. Other cosmetics containing hazardous elements like mercury and arsenic were also used.

Naturally, these chemicals gradually ate away at one's skin. The logical solution, then, was to cover these scars with more makeup. Many women eventually died from poisoning and this was likely to have led to Queen Elizabeth's death as well.

It was only in the 19th century that non-toxic facial powder became a norm, replacing the popular lead and arsenic-based facial products. This was the price of beauty – and how far an entire generation of women were willing to go. ♦ AG

## { ENGLAND }



# Beneath the Bundles of Silk

UNEARTHING THE WORLD'S MOST WELL-PRESERVED MUMMY

Text Kathy Poh

**When** we think of mummies, the first place that comes to mind is probably Egypt. But the most well-preserved mummy in the world was actually discovered almost 8,000km away in the Chinese city of Changsha in Hunan province: a 2,200-year-old body belonging to a woman known as Xin Zhui, or Lady Dai. She was the wife of Li Cang, a feudal lord from the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).

Lady Dai's skin was still soft and elastic when workers accidentally

unearthed her tomb while digging an air raid shelter in 1971. Delicate details like eyelashes and nostril hair remained intact, while muscles present allowed her limbs to be flexed. The state of Lady Dai's body was so well-preserved that scientists could conduct an autopsy as if she were freshly dead – the blood in her veins was even identified as Type A.

Despite the corpse's exceptional state, Lady Dai's health while she was in the mortal realms was quite the

opposite. Autopsies revealed that she was plagued with internal parasites and massively clogged arteries; she was also obese, suffered from gallstones and had a fused spinal disk.

Many of these ailments have been attributed to Lady Dai's opulent lifestyle. Within the burial chamber, a feast of fine cuisines featuring unusual fare like lentils, strawberries, venison, lamb and even owl was also found – a truly sumptuous spread when compared to common peasants'



staples of wheat, millet and barley. It did not help that as an aristocrat, Lady Dai probably also had servants to wait on her every need.

Pathologists believe that Lady Dai's death was caused by a sudden heart attack, soon after having a last meal of melons. Melon seeds, which our bodies can break down within an hour, were found throughout her digestive system.

Determining such meticulous details of Lady Dai's life would not have been possible if not for the past efforts of her people. Unlike what the word "mummy" suggests, Lady Dai was preserved in a radically different way from conventional Egyptian mummies.

Her body was found bundled in over 20 layers of silk – a state that scientists believe helped prevent bacterial growth – and suspended in a

## Lady Dai's Skin was Still soft and elastic, her eyelashes and nostril hair intact when her tomb was accidentally unearthed

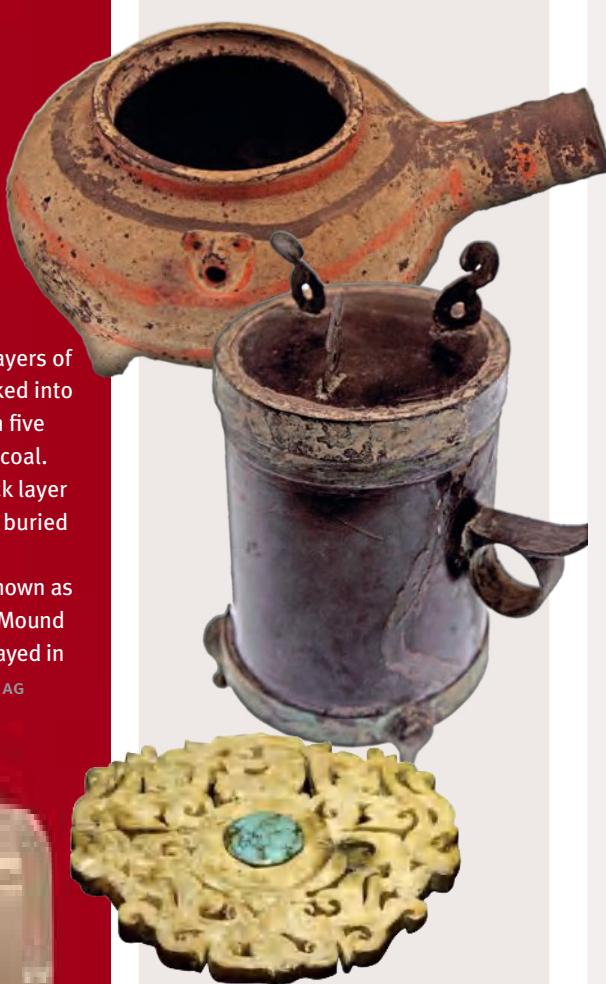
mildly acidic liquid within four layers of coffins. These caskets were packed into a large burial vault together with five tonnes of moisture-wicking charcoal. Sealed with a 90 centimetre thick layer of clay, the tomb was eventually buried 12 metres underground.

The excavation site is today known as Mawangdui, meaning King Ma's Mound and the artefacts found are displayed in the Hunan Provincial Museum. • AG



The well-preserved mummy of Lady Dai was part of a landmark archaeological excavation in Mawangdui, China

## WHAT WAS FOUND IN LADY DAI'S TOMB?



### 182 pieces of lacquerware

During Lady Dai's time, lacquer was prized by the elite. A lacquered cup was said to require a hundred men's efforts and cost ten times more than bronze

### 100 silk garments

A funeral banner of Lady Dai, painted on a T-shaped piece of silk, is believed to be the earliest evidence of Chinese portraiture

### 162 carved wooden figurines

These miniature figurines represented the large army of servants who would tend to her needs in the after world



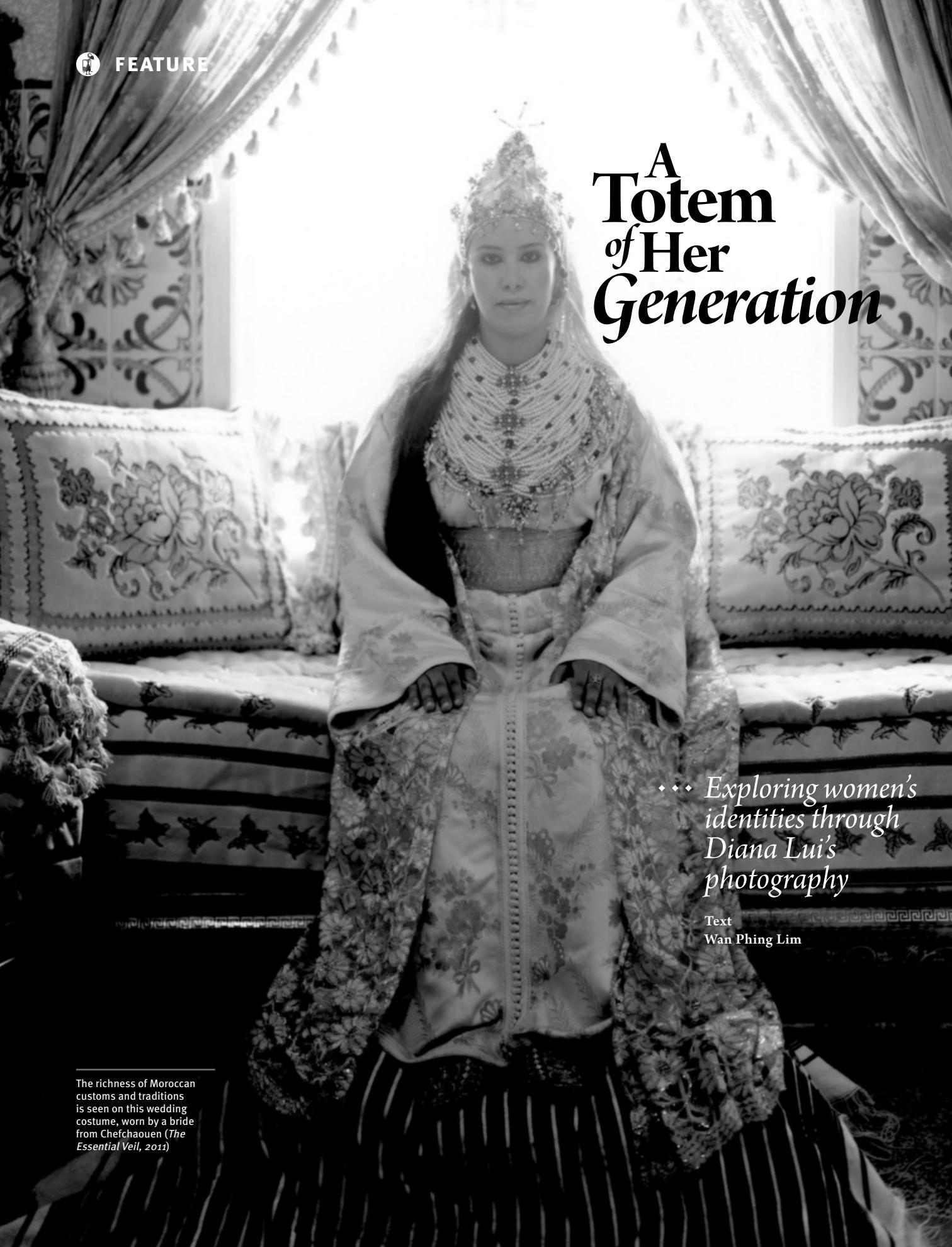
FEATURE

# A Totem of Her Generation

... Exploring women's identities through Diana Lui's photography

Text  
Wan Phing Lim

The richness of Moroccan customs and traditions is seen on this wedding costume, worn by a bride from Chefchaouen (*The Essential Veil, 2011*)



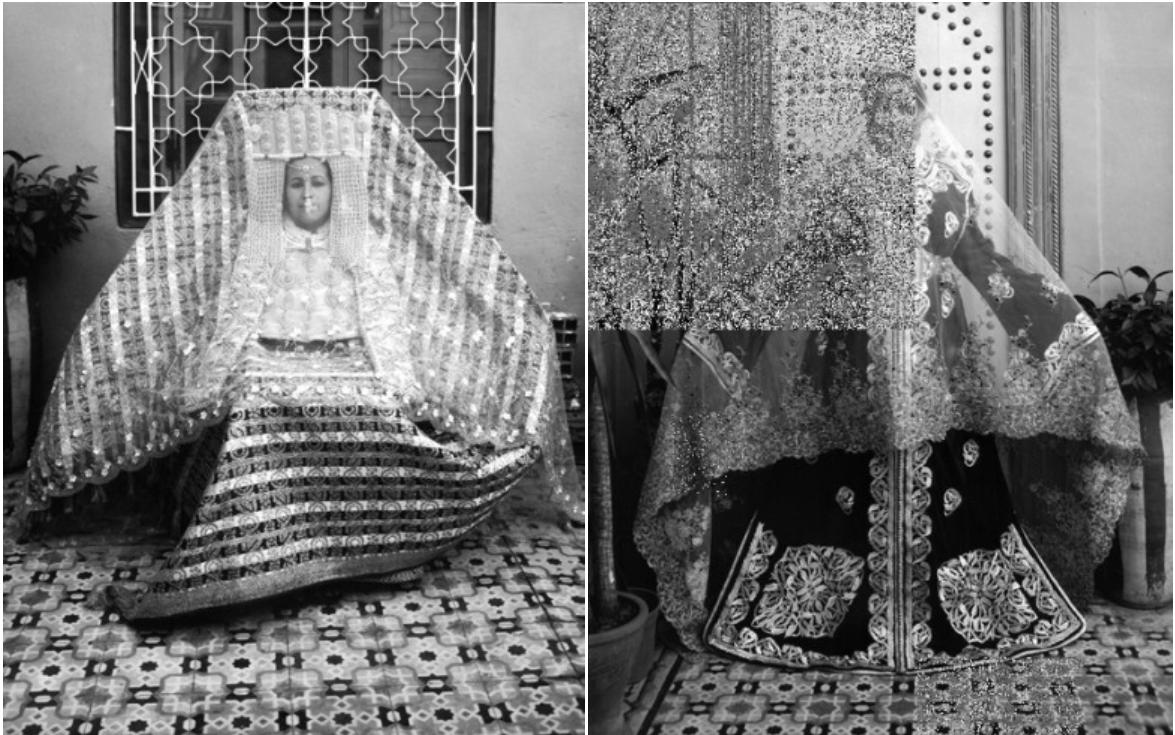
**When I first met Diana Lui, she held my gaze – deep, warm and mysterious, with the same soul and intensity with which she gazes upon her subjects and then photographs them, mostly women, using an old view camera which she found in a Pasadena flea market decades ago, and which has since become her camera of choice.**

**BELOW** A traditional wedding costume from Fes, Morocco, where marriage celebrations can last up to a week (*The Essential Veil*, 2010)

**BELOW RIGHT** Diana's series of photos explore the symbolic meanings that the veil possesses in different cultures (*The Essential Veil*, 2010)

◆ ◆ ◆

**"This camera is like my house," she says, referring to her camera obscura, which is the size of a coffee-table book and comes with an enormous black velvet cloth.**



#### GROWING ROOTS

Diana picked up the film camera during her days at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA)'s College of Design, where she studied for her Major in Fine Arts.

The vintage view camera was made in the early 20th century by the classic Gundlach-Manhattan Optical Company in Rochester, New York.

"It's a huge piece of object and it helps me to root down," she says. "It is like a pillar to me, because I

have to set it up in a person's home and it helps me to centre myself."

Identifying herself as a Franco-Belgian photographer of Chinese origin from Malaysia, Diana certainly knows what she's talking about when it comes to rooting down.

Having uprooted from her hometown in Kuala Lumpur at the age of 14, to continue high school in Los



Angeles and later migrating to Europe where she is now based, Diana's transient life between three different continents has informed most of the philosophy behind her photography.

"I'm all about gathering images into the black box of my camera and in that box is the meeting point between me and my subject. That's the encounter that I'm looking for," she explains, as we talk over a cheesecake and two coffees at the Alliance Française de Singapour, where her exhibition, TOTEM, was due to open that night.

A total of 27 portraits were on display on the upper floor of the expansive space at the Sarkies Road cultural institution, in collaboration with the Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur. The opening night was celebrated

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**Diana's photos fuse the traditional and the modern, to create new possibilities of defining a woman's identity**

with much fanfare, with a speech by Claire-Lise Dautry, the executive director of the Alliance Française and Diana herself – all this not without the absence of red wine and some delicious quiche.

#### **INVESTIGATING IDENTITY**

The word totem, which is defined as "a natural object

**FAR LEFT** Law student Mahbouba wears a wedding costume from Ksar Hellal (*The Hidden Body*, 2013)

**LEFT** Tunisia's North African culture is rich with Mediterranean heritage (*The Hidden Body*, 2013)

**BELLOW** Hadhemi wears a draped fabric from Djerba woven with a silk thread (*The Hidden Body*, 2013)

**RIGHT** Mouna wears a wedding costume from "the third day" from Raf Raf (*The Hidden Body*, 2013)



or animal that is believed by a particular society to have spiritual significance and that is adopted by it as an emblem" is a series of 14 black and white portraits of Malaysian women dressed in their traditional costumes, from Malay to Chinese to Indian, Iban and Kadazan.

"I named it Totem because a totem is an emblem and the identity of a village," Diana explains. "It can be an animal or a natural object, but it represents the strength of a village. I felt it was a symbolic title for women in Malaysia and their identities, which are so rich and complex."

Diana explores the ancient ritual of adorning women with symbolic clothing, religious objects, amulets and heirloom jewellery. Her purpose is to fuse the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, and

to effectively create new possibilities of defining a woman's identity.

"It was during my time in UCLA that I started to explore this concept of identity, nudity and how wearing disguises and different layers can make you act differently," she recalls. "For example, you'll find that if a girl is wearing a miniskirt, she may talk and act differently around men."

"I also photographed women nude, in order to explore the question if a woman's body is really hers. Who are we really on the inside without our clothes and style? Is a woman's identity imposed by society? Is it tied to the way society sees us and expects of us, which obliges us to dress and act in a certain way and to mould us into a system?"

♦ ♦ ♦

**“I photographed these women because I wanted to see if their personality could transcend their clothes, and if they represented women as commodities”**



LEFT A Moroccan mother of Berber origin wearing a *niqab*, a veiled costume imported in recent years from Iran (2010)

BOTTOM LEFT Diana's exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, promoting the Tunisian photo series (2014)

#### LAYERING AND TRANSFORMING

And so began her fascination with the concept of layering, and it wasn't until her artists' residency in Morocco in 2009 with the French Institute that she had the opportunity to further explore this idea.

“Morocco has a wedding tradition where they are required to dress in these layers of clothing for seven days prior to the wedding,” Diana explains.

“This was all arranged for by the *negaffa*, who acts almost like the wedding matchmaker. I wanted to photograph these women because I wanted to see if their personality could transcend their clothes, because these clothes are so heavy that they are literally trapped in them. I wanted to see if this was also a representation of women as commodities. So I went from exploring nudity to the total opposite, from being naked to being totally clad.”

Her series of photos, called “The Essential Veil”, or *Le Voile Essential*, was partly inspired by Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault, a French psychiatrist, painter and photographer who was known for his series of 30,000 images, mostly on women in veiled clothing. From 2009 to 2011, Diana's photos were exhibited at five galleries throughout Fes and Marrakesh.

Four years later, Diana found herself on another artist's residency in Tunisia, where the situation was much more different.

“It was post-revolution and the women were more educated,” she says. “They wore mini skirts and the women themselves had been cut off from tradition. So they went from being extremely modern in the 1960s with their miniskirts, to being conservative in the 1980s leading up to the revolution in 2011. The situation was quite chaotic, so I wanted to portray that chaos by photographing these traditional costumes in construction sites.”

The result was “The Hidden Body”, or *L'Envers des corps*, an exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) in Paris from 2013 to 2014.



The traditional Moroccan wedding costume consists of a headpiece and kaftan, a long robe made of silk, satin, chiffon and other rich fabrics (2011)



## Who was Clérambault?

Diana Lui's work in Morocco was largely influenced by Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault (1872–1934), a French psychiatrist, photographer and professor at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris.

He is most remembered for de Clérambault's Syndrome, which was named after him after a review paper he published in 1921. It describes a delusional disorder where a patient believes that a famous person or someone of higher status is in love with them, often by sending special glances or signals.

After his injuries in the first world war, de Clérambault travelled from Paris to Morocco for his convalescence. During his time there between 1912 and 1919, he studied Arabian robe draping and took over 40,000 photographs of women in robes, which he later donated to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.

After his death in 1934, it was written of de Clérambault that he was the first to invent the theory of draping and was "the first to consider the folds of the floating garments, like the rubric of a race and tribe.... he was as artistic as he was wise."



PHOTO © WWW.PSIQUIFOTOS.COM



**TOP RIGHT** Ramlah Kipli wears a handwoven silk *songket* draped over a traditional Malay costume called the *baju kurung* (*Totem*, 2015)

**BOTTOM RIGHT** January Low, a professional dancer, wears her mother's wedding dress, the *cheongsam*, in Selangor, Malaysia (*Totem*, 2015)

### HOME COMING PROJECT

But it was these two stints in Morocco and Tunisia that would pave the way and form the basis for TOTEM. Having spent some 30 years away from Malaysia, her work was spotted by Joe Sidek, director of the Georgetown Festival in Penang, Malaysia.

Diana recalls, "Joe saw my previous works and said to me, 'Diana, you should do something on your own

country.' And so I started coming back to Malaysia, not just for holidays like I would do previously, but to meet Malaysian women and to take their portraits. TOTEM is indeed a homecoming project for me and it was an opportunity to meet women of my own culture."

These modern-day portraits of women from all over Malaysia defy the simplistic racial classifications of Malaysian citizens into Malay, Chinese, Indian or Other.



"Malaysia is going through a political crisis at the moment, and this project is as much an ethnographic as it is an anthropological study," she explains.

"Shooting this series, I realised how mixed we all are and that there no longer is a 'pure race' in today's world. I would definitely describe TOTEM as a piece of subversive work."

◆ ◆ ◆

## These modern-day portraits of Malaysian women defy the simplistic racial classification of citizens into Malay, Chinese, Indian or Other

### PHOTOGRAPHY AS A FIRST LOVE

Citing her influences as renowned photographers August Sander, Edward S. Curtis and Diane Arbus, Diana's first brush with photography happened in a dark room at the age of 15.

"The summer before high school began, I discovered dark room printing for the first time," Diana recalls of her teenage years growing up in Los Angeles. "That was where I tasted my first love in photography, and in high school I was elected to be secretary of publicity and also did some photography."

But it wasn't until Diana was 19 during a trip back to her grandmother's hometown in Muar, Johor that reigned her love for film.

"In my grandmother's house I discovered these black and white photographs of our family that she had cut out and placed under the coffee table glass," she says.

"I used to imagine stories about these people and wondered who they were. They helped me to go back to a past that could only be retrieved through photos. That was how I developed my love for photography," she says, leading her to minor in Photography at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

"It's a huge responsibility to be an artist," she muses, as she tells me about her dream project to achieve self-realisation and to begin that revolution within her. "Photography is my way of questioning the world and the system that we live in. We are the voice of the unconscious." ♦ AG

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DIANA LUI is a Paris-based photographer from Malaysia, most well-known for her large intimate portraits taken on her 8x10 view camera. She is the winner of France's 20th Bourse du Talent and the Kodak Critics' Award in 2003. [www.99medusas.com](http://www.99medusas.com)

# King Tamar the Caucasian Queen

... *The Greatest of  
Georgian Rulers*

Text  
Sophie Ibbotson

In a world dominated by men, and where education, political power and military strength – all the preserves of men – were the most highly prized of attributes, any ruler who possessed them would be a king. Now and then however, history throws a fly in the ointment. King Tamar was a woman and a mighty fine one at that.



## THE LIFE OF TAMAR

The daughter of King George III and Queen Burdukhan of Georgia, Tamar was born in 1166. King George was concerned that he would be overthrown in favour of his nephew Demna, and so made two explicit demands: that the boy be castrated and blinded (he would in fact die from these wounds) and that his own infant daughter would become his co-ruler when she reached the age of 12. Georgia had never previously had a female ruler – it simply wasn’t the done thing – but the assumption amongst the elite was that she would play second-fiddle to her father and then to a suitable husband. Tamar however, had other ideas.

To the relief of the nobles, the first six years of Tamar’s rule were uneventful; she ruled alongside her father. Upon his death in 1184 however, she refused to embody the meek characteristics they expected of the so-called weaker sex. She formed alliances with other senior royals and the head of the Georgian Church, Michael IV Mirianisdze, reinforcing her legitimacy to rule. Though at first she was coerced into an unsatisfactory marriage with the Rus Prince Yuri, Tamar subsequently accused him publicly of drunkenness and sodomy. The nobles were forced to approve her divorce, and exiled the disgraced Yuri to Constantinople. Though Yuri did twice attempt to return, Tamar found herself a new suitor – the Alan Prince David Soslan – and together they kept him at bay. Tamar had married David for love.

• • •

**Georgia never had a female ruler, and the assumption was that Tamar would play second-fiddle to her father and then to a suitable husband**

## TAMAR’S TERRITORIES

Given Georgia’s fertile lands and strategic location, nestled between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea it was inevitable that neighbouring powers would eye Tamar’s territories enviously. Rather than being cowed by their power however, Tamar embarked upon an ambitious plan of expansion, making use of her new husband’s previous experience as a military commander to make and implement bold moves.





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**Tamar was far from the weak  
and easily-controlled queen  
everyone had expected,  
ruffling serious feathers  
across the Caucasus**

Shirvan (now in Azerbaijan) and Ani (Armenia) fell first, swiftly followed by Bjni and Dvin. Far from the weak and easily-controlled queen they had expected, Tamar was ruffling serious feathers across the Caucasus and into Persia. Her foes in Kars (Turkey) and Ardabil (Iran) fought hard, but it must have seemed to them that this crusading Christian queen had God on her side. She was able to found a new empire at Trebizond (Turkey) in 1204, stretching out along the Black Sea coast and exploited the weakening Byzantine



## The Coins of Tamar's Time

In many ancient societies, coins were a medium through which imagery of the governing power was spread. Unlike some Greek and Roman coins that featured their rulers' likenesses, those of Georgia were stamped with royal monograms. King Tamar's featured a large, upright crossbow flanked by acronyms of "Tamar" and "David", who was her consort.

**ABOVE** The view from Tamar's Tower of Chazhashi and Murqmeli villages, one of Georgia's UNESCO World Heritage Sites

**RIGHT** A historical painting of Tamar and her father, King George III of Georgia, whom she succeeded after his death in 1184



LEFT A 50 lari banknote, Georgia's currency, depicting Tamar and an ancient centaur

BELOW LEFT Tamar was canonised as a saint and her feast day celebrated on 14 May every year



PHOTO © IVAN VDOVIN/ALAMY



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**The title King was preferred to Queen, as it emphasised the fact that Tamar ruled in her own right and not as consort to her husband**

Empire to raise Georgia's profile and influence on the international stage. Tamar's envoys were received as far away as Jerusalem and, unlike other Christian pilgrims, they were allowed free passage into the city.

#### GEORGIA'S GOLDEN AGE

Tamar's accomplishments were not only on the battlefield, however. She was a great reformer and able to unify numerous kingdoms and principalities within Georgia, ushering in what is considered to be the country's Golden Age. Chroniclers in Georgia and abroad praised her attributes and power. Tamar was proclaimed as "Master of the Lands", "King of Kings", "Father of Orphans" and "Champion of the Messiah". The title King was preferred to Queen as it emphasised the fact that Tamar ruled in her own right and not as the consort of her husband.

Tribute poured into the Georgian court, and trade in the empire flourished. Tamar's royal treasury boomed. Ecclesiastical art, literature and magnificent illustrated manuscripts all flourished. Under Tamar's patronage, new cathedrals were founded and iconography was modified to highlight her unprecedented beauty and



## The Georgian Kingdom's Zenith

Under King Tamar's leadership, the Kingdom of Georgia was at its height of power and influence during the Middle Ages. This map shows the extent of her empire during 1184–1230.



learning. The most famous poets of the age, Shota Rustaveli, took inspiration from her life and work. She was eulogised in folk songs and myths were evolved, suggesting that Tamar conceived her son from a sunbeam passing through the window, that she was the goddess of fertility and healing, and like the pagan deity Pirimze before her, she was able to control the weather. Even during her lifetime, Tamar was thought of in almost divine terms. A Graeco-Georgian colophon and late 12th-century Vani Gospels, thought to have been

composed at the Romani Monastery in Constantinople at Tamar's behest, named her as a saint.

Tamar died most likely in 1213, near to Tbilisi. Her body was taken first to Mtskheta Cathedral then to the royal necropolis at the Gelati Monastery. But after that the story runs cold. A 13th-century letter from the French knight Guillaume de Bois would suggest that he met Tamar's son, King Giorgi-Lasha in the Holy Land, transporting his mother's remains for burial near to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.



**LEFT** A 12th-century painting of Shota Rustaveli presenting his poem to King Tamar

**BELLOW** Paintings of Tamar can be found in the Church of the Dormition in Vardzia

**BELLOW RIGHT** Tamar's beauty was eulogised in folk songs, myths and literature



## King Tamar's Monogram

King Tamar's monogram appears on the obverse of Georgia's coins, minted in the 12th century. The monogram is composed of two letters of the old Georgian script, T and R.



### After her death, the Georgian Orthodox Church took the unusual step of canonising her as Saint King Tamar

Modern scholars have been as yet unable to establish the whereabouts of her grave.

Throughout her life, Tamar was a woman of fervent faith and she maintained strong links with the Georgian Orthodox church for strategic, personal and spiritual reasons. After her death, the church took the unusual step of canonising her as Saint King Tamar.

This was remarkable for two reasons. With the notable exceptions of Saint Nino and Saint Queen Nana of Iberia, both of whom lived some 900 years before Tamar, there were almost no female saints in the

Georgian canon. Secondly, like her secular subjects, the Patriarch and other senior church figures continued to refer to Tamar as King.

Born a woman, Tamar had risen through circumstance to be anointed king. She defied every contemporary expectation for her sex and became the greatest of Georgian rulers. Her triumphs are remembered by the Georgian Orthodox Church on her saint's day, 14 May, but she and her accomplishments deserve to be recognised and celebrated far more widely. Whether as King or Queen, saint or mortal figure, Tamar is an inspiration for us all. ♦ AG

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**SOPHIE IBBOTSON** is an entrepreneur and international business consultant. She is the founder of Maximum Exposure UK and *Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel*. Sophie is also the author of five Bradt Travel Guides, including Kashmir, Uzbekistan and Sudan.



COVER STORY

# India's Pink War

... *The fight against women's violence*

by  
Zigor Aldama

{ INDIA }

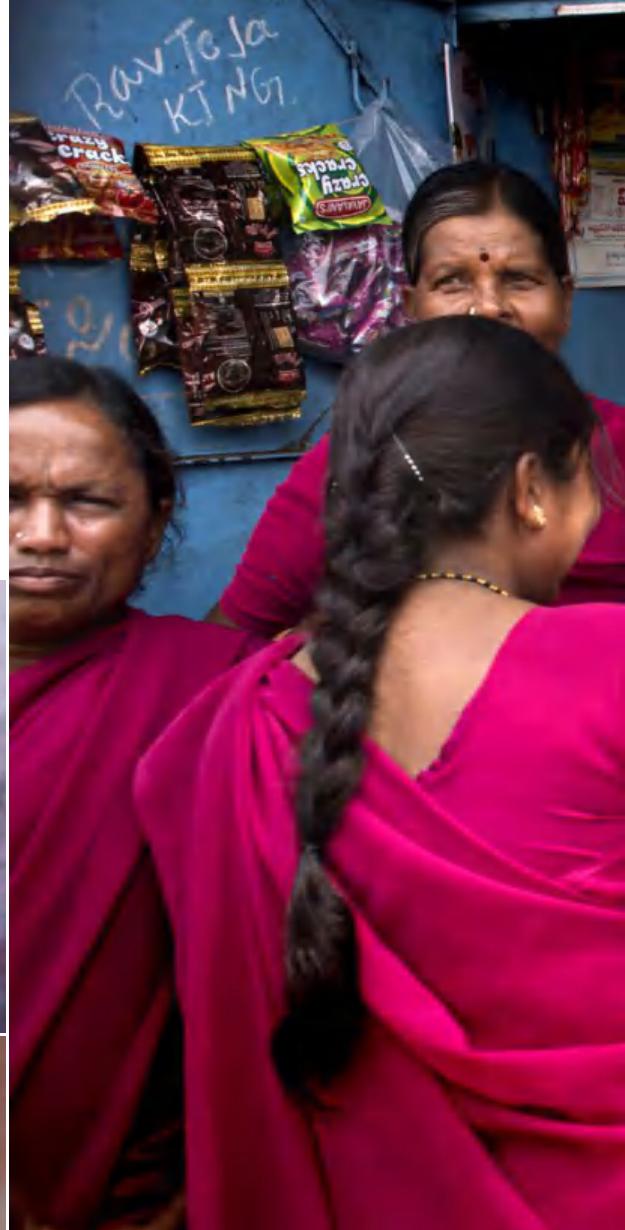


They wear pink saris, wield sticks and don't hesitate to use violence in their fight for women's rights. These are the ladies of the Gulabi Gang, an association created by Sampat Pal Devi to eradicate gender violence in India, one of the countries in the world where women are often discriminated against even before birth.

## JANKI DEVI'S STORY

Janki Devi's relationship with the man she fell in love with was never easy. She was only 15 when she met Anand Kumar, a 20-something to whom a few months later she lost her virginity, but both sets of parents opposed the union outright.

Not surprisingly, in rural areas of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, as is common across the country in varying degrees, romantic relationships are a matter arranged between two families regardless of feelings. They become a mathematical operation where caste, economic status and political relations between the two



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**"For every case reported  
there is at least another one  
who has suffered in silence"**

**ABOVE LEFT** Sayah Bana, 22, joined the Gulabi Gang to find justice for her case after being cheated on and abused by her husband

**LEFT** Sampat Pal Devi, founder of the Gulabi Gang at their headquarters in Uttar Pradesh

**ABOVE** The Gulabi Gang is a team of women working towards justice for oppressed and abused women



clans are considered. Love, they say, comes with time and routine.

For Janki and Anand that equation did not yield its desired result, so their parents demanded that they cease the relationship and stop seeing each other. Against their parents' wishes, the couple decided to marry in secret. Thus, as tradition dictates, Janki finally moved into the home of her in-laws in 2006. And so began another nightmare for her. For unknown reasons, because she was never allowed to access medical tests, she was unable to conceive a child.

So, on 23 February 2015, Anand's parents doused her with gasoline and set her on fire. Neighbours still managed to take her to the hospital as she hung by the thread of her life, but Janki Devi died that very same night. Despite the complaint lodged by her parents, the

police did not carry out any investigation and no media showed interest in her story.

### INDIA'S SHOCKING STATISTICS

Janki is only one out of more than 300,000 women each year who suffer from different forms of gender violence in India, a country where, according to official statistics from 2013, a woman is abducted every 10 minutes and one is raped every 20 minutes. And these figures still fail to reflect the country's situation in all its cruelty, because, as Doreen Reddy, Women Sector Director for the Rural Development Trust explains, "For every case reported there is at least another one who has suffered in silence".

In fact, according to a government survey conducted between 2005 and 2006, 51% of men – and, surprisingly,

55% of women – justify domestic violence in some form or another based on these excuses; the disrespecting of in-laws, the postponing of housework and arguing with the husband. And it doesn't only happen in poor rural areas – in February 2014, the Supreme Court of India ratified that rape within marriage is legal.

Many also believe that an infertile woman is akin to a useless animal, and some, including those who killed Janki, even feel entitled to take matters into their own hands.

But her father, Dinesh Prasad Panday, believes there is no justification for murdering a woman. So, after months of unsuccessfully trying to get the police to prosecute Anand's family, who belong to a higher caste and have contacts among local government officials, he has decided to seek justice in another way: he has taken the case to the headquarters of

the Gulabi Gang, located in the small town of Badausa.

Created in 2006, this association in which about 400,000 women spread across the country are already a part of has become the terror of rapists, abusers and corrupt policemen – all because its founder, Sampat Pal Devi, is not a woman to be messed with.

"I don't advocate violence, but there are times when that is the only way to fight. There are people with whom words and arguments are simply not enough," she stresses, pointing to the photo of Janki.

That is why those who join the ranks of the Gulabi Gang wear a distinctive uniform that is now instantly recognisable; the pink sari, India's traditional dress. With the 500 rupees annual fee, members also get a stick to carry around at all times.

"It is intended to protect us, but also

Sampat Pal Devi (right) teaches a member how to protect herself against abusive husbands and men



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## **Created in 2006, the Gulabi Gang with about 400,000 women members has become a terror of rapists, abusers and corrupt policemen**

to threaten and, if necessary, to beat up the abusers,” says Pal. The latter is true, for in 2002 Pal found a man beating a woman in the street and decided to intervene. But she was quickly abused, too, so the following day, she managed to convince five other women from her village to beat him back. Her strategy yielded good results then and hasn’t changed much since.

### **THE ONLY WAY TO SEE CHANGE**

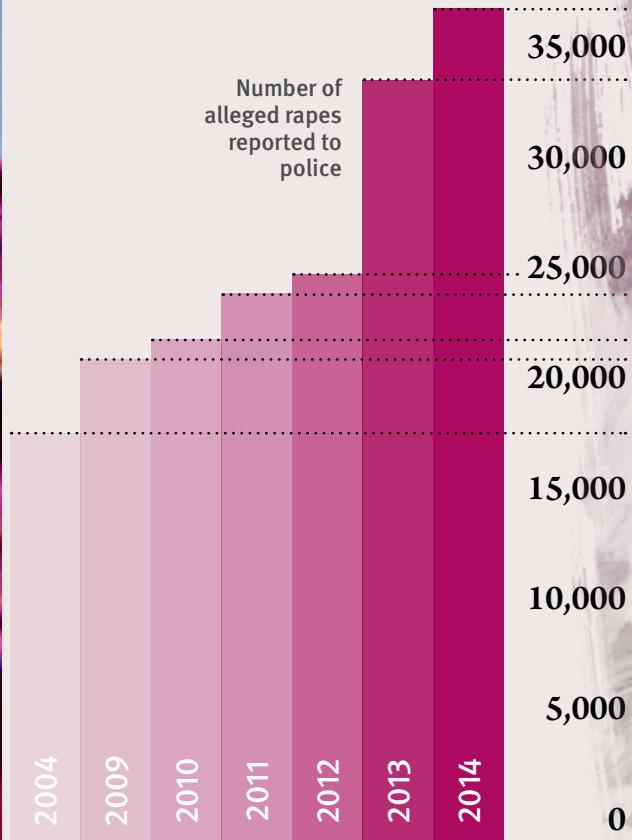
Every day, Pal gets several cases like Janki’s, and with most of them she is unable to contain her anger. After all, she knows well what the pain suffered by these women feels like. Pal herself was the daughter of poor peasants, and she was forced to marry a 25-year-old man soon after her first period.

“I was taken out of school when I didn’t yet know how to read and write, and I became a slave in the house of my in-laws”, she recalls. Three years later, at the age of 15, she gave birth to the first of her five children, who she delivered in a row, “one every year”.

But her strong character trumped the difficulty of the situation and she made her in-laws respect her. Soon, she found out what she really wanted to do in life.

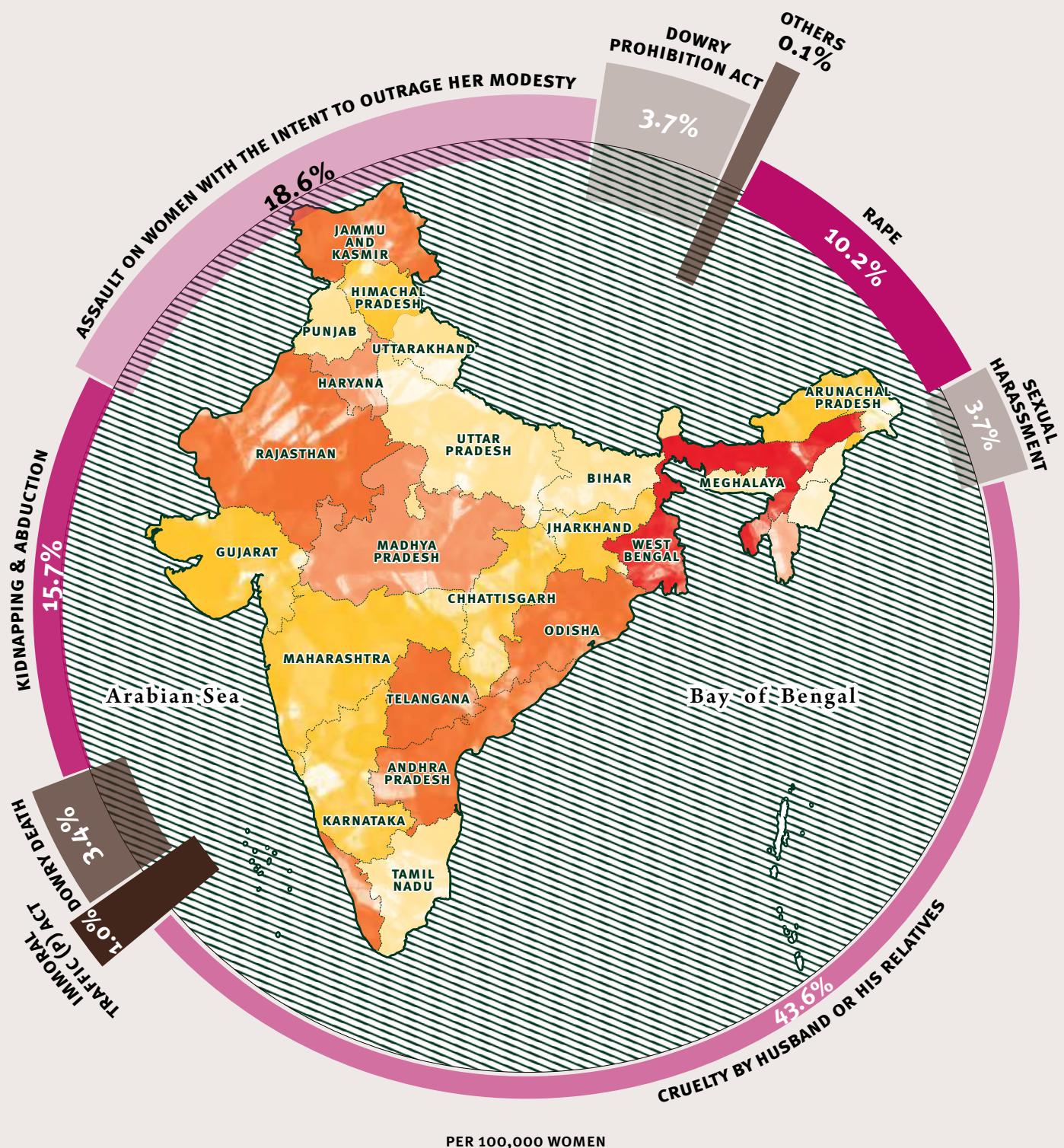


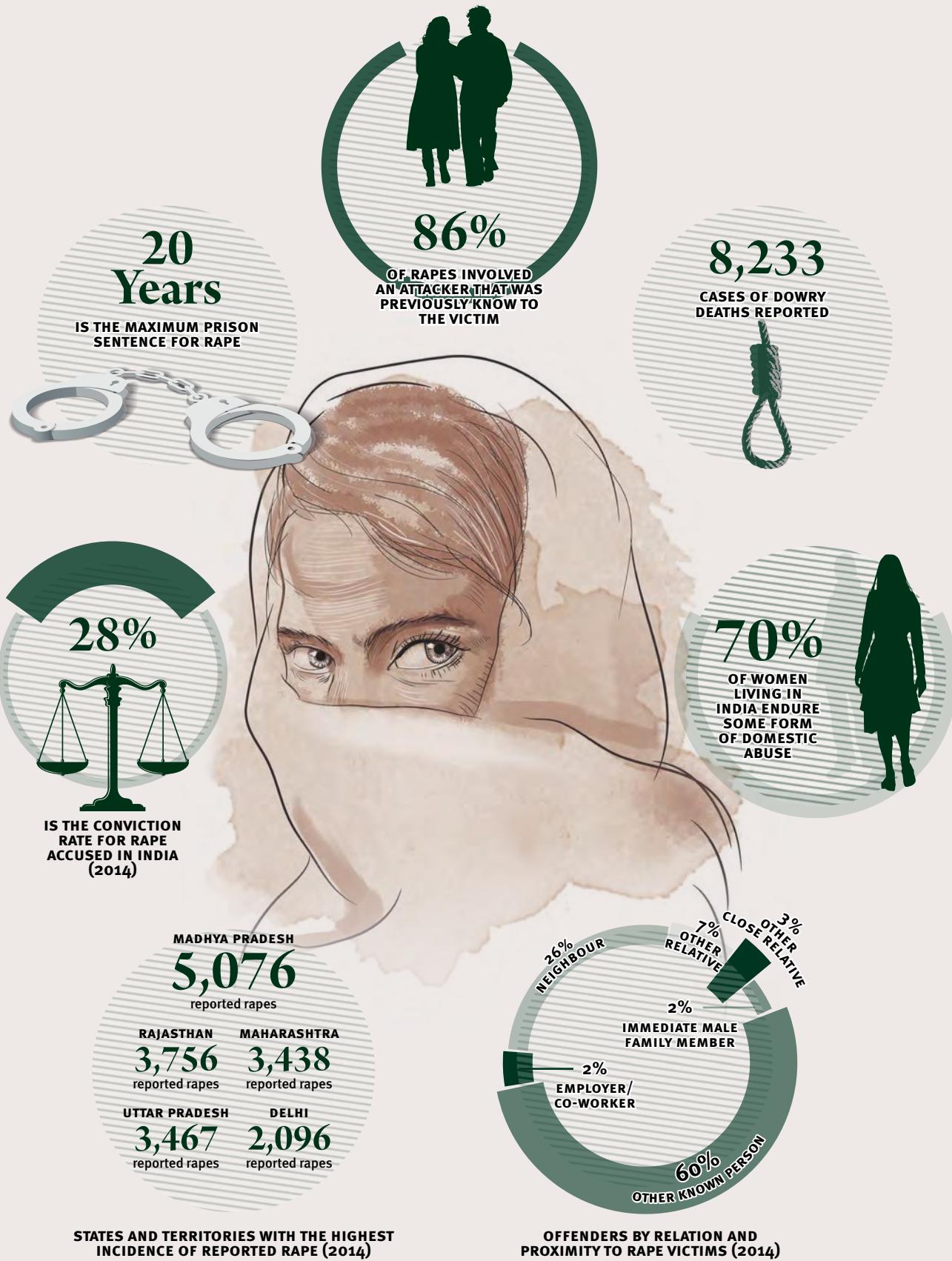
### **SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN INDIA**



# Crimes against Women

## TYPES OF CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA





"I became interested in the work of groups who said they were seeking women's liberation. But I realised that they could not meet any of their goals. People laughed at them," she recounts.

"I know my position seems very radical, but sometimes the stick is the only way to achieve change."

#### A PINK REVOLUTION

Despite her unorthodox and vigilante methods, those of which attract the most attention, Pal has also tailored more traditional programmes to move beyond the specific cases that land at her feet daily, in order to achieve a greater impact in the community.

"Society will only change if we eliminate the inherent subordination of the role given to women. And this is a revolution that has to come from us. Therefore, besides having established self-help and legal counselling groups to address individual cases, we focus also on programmes to achieve their freedom, from savings funds to events with companies where women can be hired," she says.

#### A BETTER FUTURE

Sampat Pal Devi's goals are very clear and ambitious. She says, "We want to eradicate child marriage and the dowry tradition, act firmly against domestic violence and promote the empowerment of women through education and social awareness."

"Many argue that those are rights already protected by our Constitution, but the problem doesn't lie with the law, thank goodness, but with its implementation. We live in a violent patriarchy that permeates all institutions, especially the police and politicians at the highest level. If we women don't save ourselves, nobody will," she concludes. ♦ AG

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ZIGOR ALDAMA is an award-winning journalist based in Shanghai, China, where he works as correspondent for Vocento, Spain's largest media group. He has been covering social issues in the Far East since 1999 and the Indian suicide crisis since 2013.

MIGUEL CANDELA is a Spanish photographer currently based in Hong Kong. He specialises in social features across Asia and uses photography to capture the present as a historical memento. Miguel won Best New Talent at the 2012 Prix de la Photographie (Px3) Paris competition.



## FEMALE-FRIENDLY INITIATIVES ACROSS ASIA

### KTM Women's Carriage – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

In 2010, Malaysia's Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) launched women carriages on its intercity trains. Easily identifiable by pink stickers on its windows, doorways and platform floors, the special coach is said to protect women from sexual harassment and jostling with male passengers.



### She-Taxi – Kerala, India

She-Taxi is hailed as the country's first 24/7 women taxi network to provide safe, secure and responsible travel for women. Launched in November 2013 in Thiruvananthapuram, its success has even sparked a She-Bus initiative.



### LadyJek – Jakarta, Indonesia

Brandishing pink logos and pink helmets, LadyJek is a female-only motorbike taxi service that was launched in October 2015. Using the Ladyjek app, ladies can book a motorbike ride driven by fellow ladies, where safety is a priority for many women in the city of 10 million.



Narasamma Harijana hugs her daughter Navaneetha, who at 15 years old was matchmaked with her uncle

# Land Before Time

Text Alfred Fahringer

A NEW MOTH SPECIES IS DISCOVERED IN ACEH

**The** discovery of a new moth species, the *Endoclita fahringeri*, in the mountains of Gunung Leuser in Sumatra, Indonesia is proving to be a landmark in scientific history, as narrated by Alfred Fahringer.

## Into an ancient origin

It was the beginning of August in the dry season, and our journey began from Singapore to Medan. Together with my brother Richard and our friend Nick Hughes, we first passed the resort town of Berastagi and onto Kutacane before arriving at the starting point of our trek, located on the eastern foothills of Gunung Leuser. The Gunung Leuser mountain range is located in Aceh, the northernmost province in Sumatra. Its capital, Banda Aceh, was badly hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.

**Gunung Leuser sits on 220 million-year-old rocks, harbouring creatures untouched for millennia like this *Endoclita* moth**

Gunung Leuser is a truly prehistoric landscape, sitting on 220 million-year-old rocks and harbouring forests and creatures that for millennia have been untouched. It was my love and curiosity for moths and butterflies that led me on this two-week expedition, and perhaps the desire to spot an Ice Age relic,



trapped in a pocket somewhere on these tropical mountains.

Our guide was a short man in his mid-forties called Happy Happy, whose real name was Usman. Together with five porters, we ascended up primary forests, sumitting at Gunung Pucuk Angkasan, Camp Simpang Air, Camp Bipak 1 and finally through

Sungai Alas, one of the largest rivers of Sumatra into the Bipak Ridge.

Throughout this time, my eyes were constantly on the lookout for butterflies. I spotted no more than three or four. They were species that I recognised – two *Delias momea* crossing the ladang, a *Lexias* at the entrance to the forest and an orange



The *Endoclita fahringeri* was discovered during Alfred Fahringer's trek to Gunung Leuser in August 2014

## TAXONOMY OF BUTTERFLIES

### Kingdom

*Animalia*  
(animal)

### Phylum

*Anthropoda*  
(invertebrate)

### Class

*Insecta*  
(insects)

### Order

*Lepidoptera*  
(moths and butterflies)

### Family

*Hepialidae*  
(swift or ghost moths)

### Genus

*Endoclita*

A genus of moths with 60 described species found in eastern and southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent

*Mycalesis* at the forest edge. One morning, a high alpine butterfly even chose to sunbathe on our tent. It was a *Dodona robinsoni*, an extremely rare and remnant species restricted to these mountains here in Sumatra.

For the coming days we passed damp weather, wet shoes and obstacle courses made up of thick

## The Gunung Leuser mountain range were once part of Gondwanaland, the southerly supercontinent that existed approximately 300 million years ago

vegetation. Everything my eyes could absorb reminded me of Jurassic Park, a terrain long gone from the face of the earth, except for this one. The ancient rocks of these mountains were once part of Gondwanaland, the southerly supercontinent that existed approximately 300 million years ago.

### A descendant of the dinosaur age

And it was here, on the sixth day, that I spotted "her". It was the porter, Sulaiman who found the moth, sitting

on the grassy ground at one side of our trail at Camp Bipak Batu. She was huge, perhaps 15cm across, and I instantly recognised her ancient features – exactly similar venations on her forewings and hindwings, a characteristic called *Homoneura*, a primitive feature of the Lepidoptera butterflies and moths.

A direct descendent of the early *Homoneura* moths, she has been passing on her peculiar and primitive features for perhaps the past 70 million years, as old as the dinosaurs





**ABOVE** View of Gunung Sinabung, which is another five hours' drive before reaching Gunung Leuser

**BETWEEN** Alfred and porter, Usman unravelling butterfly specimens after their trek

before they went extinct. This butterfly was definitely my dinosaur, and she is the prize that made all the sweat and effort worthwhile!

Trembling with excitement, all I could determine on site was that she was most likely a *Hepialidae* species. Through my efforts to find her identity,

I discovered Dr. John Grehan in the USA, a leading global scientist on *Hepialidae* moths. She turned out to be a specimen yet unknown to science, belonging to the genus *Endoclita*. In Sumatra, only four species have ever been recorded, and from those, all are specimens discovered more than a century ago. In fact, no new Sumatran species has been discovered in the last 60 years.

With this new discovery, I must go back to Gunung Leuser again, back to the land of the dinosaurs in northern Sumatra and to possibly find a male specimen to complete our knowledge of this new species. Her specialty will help to preserve these mountains and help her live on in her home on our extremely fragile planet, for hopefully the next 70 million years. ♦ AG



**ALFRED FAHRINGER** spent two weeks at the Gunung Leuser National Park in August 2014. He is an avid butterfly collector since age seven. Alfred has worked and lived in Asia since 1991, settling down in Singapore in 2007.



FEATURE



A photograph of a woman in a white lace dress and a man in a dark suit standing outdoors. The woman is looking down at something in her hands. The man is standing behind her, looking towards the camera. The background is blurred greenery.

{ SINGAPORE }

# Who was Sylvia?

... Remembering Singapore's  
Renaissance woman, Sylvia Kho  
(1917–2013)

Text

Khong Swee Lin

Photos

Justin Ong

**The** question posed in German composer Franz Schubert's immortal art song, "Who is Sylvia?", may be answered in this appreciation and retrospective on Singapore's Renaissance woman, Sylvia Kho (1917–2013), innovator and entrepreneur in the arts of fashion, beauty and decoration. As Singapore's foremost bridal couturier, creative, multi-talented Sylvia could perform even the most mundane of tasks with a certain, unmistakeable Sylvian flair.

She not only changed the course of local sartorial currents, but created a whole new industry centred around one of society's most important rites of passage – the institution of marriage, and she is well-remembered by hundreds of local and regional brides from the 1950s to the 1970s. Perhaps what is not so well-known is the other side of Sylvia... the story of a life nothing short of amazing.

### SYLVIA'S STORY

Many suns ago, at the invitation of local rulers, Hakka and Cantonese miners carved out uncertain futures –

• • •

**Sylvia Kho was Singapore's foremost bridal couturier, innovator and entrepreneur in the arts of fashion, beauty and decoration**

their yield of tin ore from the mountain ranges of the Malay Peninsula. Breaking their backs and fettered by indentures, these men from South China toiled amidst harsh tropical terrain. Kanching in Selangor, in the Federated Malay States (1896) was a tin mining and commercial centre, the seat of the Cantonese secret society, Ghee Hin Kongsi, whose name meant "the rise of righteousness". Within this extraordinary setting, unfettered unions unfurled, free from familial constraints and traditions.

Hakka tin miner and rubber planter Wong Yat Hin didn't conform in seeking a bride from his native South China. He had however, one unusual criterion – his



**OPENING SPREAD** An Elizabethan-inspired gown with leg of mutton sleeves, embroidered with French chantilly lace and seed pearls

**LEFT** A late 1930s photo of Sylvia Kho, displayed at the Peranakan Museum as part of their "Great Peranakans" exhibition



**Sylvia Kho**  
Singapore, late 1930s  
Photograph  
Collection of Sophie Kho

**Chio Kim Siew with her daughters**  
Singapore, 1930s  
Photograph  
Collection of Sophie Kho

This photograph shows the Wong sisters, from left to right, Ullie, Eddie, Irene, Sylvia, and Alice. Their mother, Chio Kim Siew, known for her beauty, money, and grace, educated at the Methodist Girls' School in Singapore and later trained to be nurses at the Singapore General Hospital. She was skilled at sewing and embroidery, and taught them all how to sew every spare, of lessons held every afternoon of 4 pm.



future wife had to be literate (obviously he needed someone to keep his books). She would subsequently act as his interpreter, conducting negotiations on his behalf to secure a dredge for his mine in Kanching.

Enter Chia Kim Siew, a Teochew Peranakan girl and a teacher who lived in Singapore's St Margaret's School, one of the few girls educated in English. The headmistress thought Kim Siew was of marriageable age and thus indulged in judicious matchmaking, pairing her with Wong.

Women of the Chinese Peranakan community (which developed out of early liaisons between Hokkien traders and indigenous women of the Malay archipelago since the late 14th century or so) were generally excellent housekeepers running their households with an iron hand (with or without velvet glove). Thus Peranakan women were not only skilled in needlework, but mistresses of their kitchens, concocting masterpieces of their complex, labour-intensive hybrid cuisine with a toss of spice or sprinkle of herb.

**BELOW** Sylvia started the trend of wearing summer "straw hats" at weddings

**FAR BELOW** Precious wedding photos of Sylvia's family dressed in her gown designs



## NEEDLEWORK IN HER BLOOD

Presenting three heirs and eight heiresses to the Wong family, Kim Siew ruled the roost in Kanching. All girls were given sewing and beadwork lessons daily. Discipline reaped rewards. Fifth daughter Sien Moy, or "Sylvia", could from an early age draft, cut and sew a pattern by herself impressing her needlework teacher to such an extent that she was asked to teach her peers upon attending school in later years. She also sewed Peranakan-style bed accessories for the nuptials of her father's estate workers. Her siblings were equally capable.

Their wise mother ensured that there was a time to play and work, and a time to pray. Her Christian beliefs firmly instilled in her children from a very early age shaped their characters and formed the cornerstone of Sylvia's ventures. The five girls briefly attended Selangor's and subsequently Singapore's Methodist Girls' Schools.

During the Depression, the family moved to Senai, Johor and they managed to attend school in Singapore where Sylvia ably looked after her sisters, a fact which was never forgotten in later years. Her entrepreneurial streak had begun to surface as she utilised her skills and love for sewing to support her siblings. Handmade Chinese-style "frog" buttons sold for two cents each. "Special" ones cost \$5 each! She could sew Peranakan-style slippers for men and women or embroider cushion covers.

**BELOW** The Singer No. 103 sewing machine used by Sylvia to sew all her dresses

**RIGHT** Sylvia's niece, Susan dressed in a simple, classic bridesmaid dress in 1964



## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The arrival of the second world war touched Sylvia in a series of remarkable events.

Sinister 7 December 1941 marked not only the catastrophe of Pearl Harbor, but the landing of Japanese forces on Kota Bahru, Kelantan on Malaya's east coast. The next day, the first bombs fell on Singapore causing 61 deaths and over 700 injured. Sylvia who then trained as a nurse at the then General Hospital, came face to face with the horrors of war.

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**From an early age, Sylvia could  
draft, cut and sew a pattern  
all by herself, impressing her  
needlework teachers**





ABOVE Sylvia's sewing machine on display at The Peranakan Museum

BETWEEN The long and elaborate train of a Sylvia Kho gown on display



In these circumstances, as Sylvia's family was in Malaya, going back was not an option. She, as well as the brave medical and non-medical staff of the General Hospital, soldiered on whilst artillery shells fell in the hospital vicinity. Medical staff, young medical students and nurses who were her friends were killed.

Intriguingly, it was the impending fall of Singapore that set in steady motion a sequence of remarkable events changing the course of Sylvia's life. While wondering and praying over what to do, the thought of getting a steamship ticket to leave Singapore entered her mind. Desperate to join her fiancé Kho Hock Chiao in the Dutch East Indies, (now the Republic of Indonesia) Sylvia tried to get a passage on the last vessel out.

As she nervously queued up to secure a ticket, an elderly English lady in the queue at the ticket office fainted. Nobody helped her. Stepping forward to assist and revive her, she lost her place in the queue composed entirely of British nationals. One man refused to let her back in as she was Chinese. Her kind act did not go unnoticed and a staff member quietly handed her a ticket.

Afraid that she might not make it to the harbour in time to board the vessel, she panicked as air raid

• • •  
**Her time in Semarang, Indonesia after her marriage was well-spent learning dressmaking, cookery, hairdressing and cake decoration**



**ABOVE** A custom-made headress, fashioned with wires and stitched with lace

**B BELOW** Sylvia made gowns for hundreds of brides in a career that spanned 40 years



sirens began to sound and bombs began dropping. Then seemingly out of nowhere, a British officer drove up and offered to escort her safely on board, straight to the Captain.

That night, the vessel was shelled by Japanese warplanes and began to sink. The Captain, a Christian, asked his passengers to pray, so down on their knees they went. Amazingly, the boat limped on for five days, and even as provisions and water ran out, they survived.

Arriving in Djakarta (as it was then spelt), she met people who helped her get accommodation and transportation to her fiancé's family in Semarang. Her guardian angels continued protection there. Ever diligent, her time in Semarang after her marriage was well-spent learning dressmaking, cookery, hairdressing, cake decoration and other craft from Indo-Dutch teachers setting the tone for future endeavours.

Leaving Semarang was as memorable as her arrival. The end of the Japanese Occupation of the Dutch East Indies brought about a period of instability before the formation of the Republic of Indonesia. As Sylvia was then a British subject, she left, standing in a truck along with three others all the way to the airport. En route, a hail of bullets hit her truck as it sped. Upon arrival at the airport, the driver, a British officer, told her her life had been saved by God, that he saw bullets flying by her and not hitting her.

*"Say laces and offer her some guipure..."*

*whispered Bixiou in Gazonal's ear.*

*(Unconscious Comedians,  
- Honore de Balzac)*



**ABOVE RIGHT** Sylvia's handmade veil, now a collection of the National Museum of Singapore

**RIGHT** An imported headdress, made of organza and silk flowers embellished with tiny guipure flowers

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE, NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD

## BACK IN SINGAPORE

Following Balzac, Sylvia now back in post-war Singapore offered brides exquisite guipure and chantilly lace, ethereal tulles and the smoothest satins. Nobody had seen or felt such materials. The secrets of creating exclusive wedding gowns were gleaned from extensive study and buying trips to the UK, France, The Netherlands and the US. French lace manufacturers feted her, providing limousine services on the tarmac upon her arrival in France. Her purchases of lace pieces manufactured on small hand looms were veritable works of art, each pattern now no longer available.

Ever the consummate artist, she brought perfection to her craft by going not one but hundreds of steps further. The luxurious laces she acquired were not simply transferred onto gowns – each motif was individually cut out and repositioned on the gown she was working on, then ornamented with seed pearls or other decoration.



**LEFT** Sylvia's niece, Susan, wearing a Swiss lace dress on her wedding day in 1984

**B BELOW** At the height of her career, Sylvia travelled extensively to France and the US to buy lace





As part of her good works, Sylvia generously donated 200 gowns in 2003 for fundraising purposes benefitting Singapore's St Luke's Hospital. In 2013, she donated 13 of her gowns to the National Museum of Singapore.

In this spirit, her daughter Sophie Kho established *Sylvia's Lace* in memory of her mother. Sale proceeds of handcrafted handbags fashioned out of Sylvia's vintage lace collection will be donated to Singapore's Pathlight School and The Enabling Village.



LEFT Sylvia's niece, Susan, reminisced that her aunt had skilfully cut her wedding veil freehand in a flash

She introduced flexible stiffeners, then unavailable locally, for that full skirted "can can" effect needed in wedding dresses (her competitors used cane inserts which popped open if extra weight was added to the garment by way of a train).

The move towards a stronger Occidental influence in attire had begun. Every article she produced bore the "Sylvia Kho" mark of quality. Besides gowns, brides wore veils and headdresses, the last either imported or stitched personally by Sylvia. While her gowns have been showcased, her bridal accessories were in a class of their own. Hand-stitched headdresses of guipure lace flowers reflect her Peranakan training and heritage in their utmost delicacy, fine stitch work and liveliness.

To complement the whole outfit, Sylvia offered makeup and beauty classes and services, hairstyling and even made wax-flowers for headdresses. Never one to do things by halves, she opened bridal, hair and beauty boutiques around town in Outram Park, then Tanglin Shopping Centre and thereafter Orchard Towers, after initially working from her tiny bedroom in Tiong Bahru, where she simply transferred her baby from bed to floor, laid a plank on her bed and started to cut gowns.

Although helped by a team of seamstresses later, she personally cut every gown and attended fittings. Susan Chong, her niece reminisced that her aunt had cut her wedding veil freehand in a flash. Such was her expertise.

Sylvia's creativity knew no bounds. Thinking out of the box, she realised that adornment extended beyond the bridal pair to their carriage, so she placed bridal

◆ ◆ ◆

## Every article she produced bore the "Sylvia Kho" mark of quality, from hand-stitched headdresses to gowns and veils

dolls on wedding cars, now a practice taken for granted. Quickly spotting opportunities, she provided gowns for rent for budget brides. As she put it simply, "There was a need..."

Her clients evidently agreed. They straddled every stratum of society from VIPs to politicians and royalty to the girl next door. Her daughter Sophie recalled that if a bride faced financial problems, Sylvia would waive the cost of the gown or accessories.

Perhaps the most beautiful aspect of Sylvia was the God-given ability to help anyone – customers, friends, her staff or even strangers. Her businesses not only made brides beautiful as her tagline proclaimed, they were her vehicles for healing relationships and changing lives, thanks to her deep Christian love and concern for people. Her counsel, indeed, went beyond the dress. ♦ AG

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# Freya Stark, the Passionate Nomad

ONE WOMAN'S FEMININE INFLUENCE ON THE ARAB WORLD

Text Sophie Ibbotson

**"The tourist travels in his own atmosphere like a snail in his shell and stands, as it were, on his own perambulating doorstep to look at the continents of the world. But if you discard all this, and sally forth with a leisurely and blank mind, there is no knowing what may not happen to you."**



You should be careful which books you give your daughters, because you never know what irrepressible, adventurous spirit they might engender.

For Freya Stark (1893–1993), the desire to escape and explore was sown on her ninth birthday when she was given *One Thousand and One Nights*, the famous collection of Arabian tales.

## Stark's Early Childhood

The child of Bohemian painters, she spent her early years dragged around rural Europe before her mother became enamoured with an Italian Count, following him to Italy. A freak accident in the Count's carpet factory – Stark's hair became caught in a piece of machinery and it was ripped off, along with an ear and part of her

scalp – left the teenager seriously disfigured. Her chances of making a good marriage match quashed, she resigned herself to being her mother's carer and companion.

Stark's early years equipped her with an aptitude for languages. In spite of receiving no formal education, she spoke English, Italian and German as well as Latin. In her late thirties,

a Professor suggested Stark take up Arabic. It was shortly after the first world war when the Middle East was in flux that Stark became desperate for any opportunity which might allow her to leave her life of drudgery in Italy behind. When her sister, Vera, died from a miscarriage in 1926, Stark concluded that her true cause of death was that she had let other people decide how she would live. Stark was not going to make the same mistake.

### First Forays Abroad

And so, in 1927 at the age of 34, Stark boarded a cargo ship bound for Beirut, with scant funds in her pocket. For the first time in her life, she could come and go as she pleased. Everywhere seemed bursting with possibilities.

In the 1920s, the Middle East was a mess. The Ottoman Empire had collapsed and Britain and France held a series of officially temporary mandates, which showed little sign

of giving way to the independent states which the Arabs had been promised. Many of the Bedouin tribes had been brutally suppressed and their territories were governed by martial law. None of this fazed Stark. If anything, it made her more curious.

Setting out from Damascus on a donkey accompanied by an English lady friend and a Druze guide, Stark ventured straight into these forbidden lands. She prided herself on travelling

The map highlights several locations: BEIRUT (LEBANON), DAMASCUS (SYRIAN), CANA (ISRAEL), BAGHDAD (IRAQ), ALAMUT CASTLE (IRAN), and HADHARAMAUT (YEMEN). A circular route is drawn connecting Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Alamut Castle. Another line extends from Alamut Castle towards Hadhramaut.

LURISTAN (IRAN)

BEIRUT (LEBANON)

DAMASCUS (SYRIAN)

CANA (ISRAEL)

BAGHDAD (IRAQ)

ALAMUT CASTLE (IRAN)

HADHARAMAUT (YEMEN)

### The Valleys of the Assassins: and Other Persian Travels (1934)

*The Valleys of the Assassins* established Freya Stark as one of her generation's most prolific explorers. The book chronicles her travels into Luristan, or Lorestan, the mountainous terrain located between Iraq and present-day Iran. Stark also became the first female to document for the Royal Geographical Society in London.

LEFT Explorer and author Dame Freya Stark photographed in May 1957

light – three baggage mules, two tents and three servants – and taking rough routes through the countryside. When Stark did run into French Army officers, she lied through her teeth, claiming to have been misdirected by her Thomas Cook guidebook. Likewise, whilst temporarily imprisoned as a suspected spy, she charmed her French keepers into accompanying her on horse rides and local sightseeing trips, and to join her for dinner.

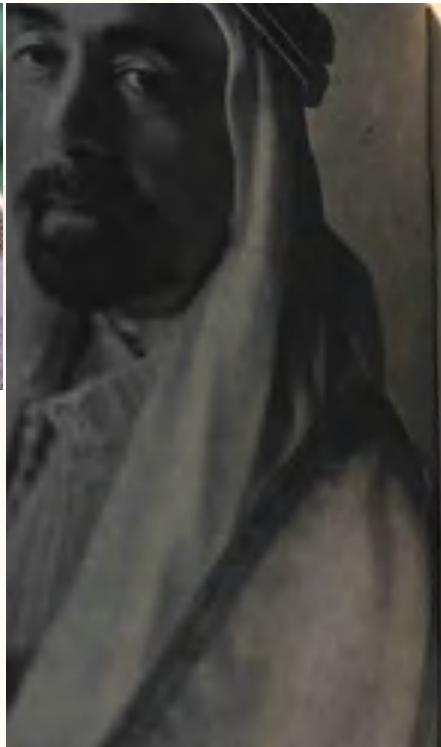
### Roaming the Middle East

Stark roamed Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Persia and Arabia for the next 12 years. She did not travel with an official purpose, nor with the professional training of an archaeologist or surveyor, but nevertheless had acute observational skills and wrote vivid accounts of her discoveries. Her perilous journeys through the Elburz mountains of Iran were recorded in *The Valley of the Assassins; and other Persian Tales* (1934) where she rediscovered the

ancient port of Cana and mapped the castle at Alamut. She was also the first European woman to travel in Luristan in modern-day Iran; and if it weren't for falling ill and having to be airlifted to Aden in Yemen, she would also have been the first explorer to reach the ruins of Shabwa.

Stark's writings brought her to the attention of the Royal Geographical Society in London, and readers eagerly awaited the latest instalment of her adventures. Like Lawrence of Arabia and Gertrude Bell before her, Stark had captivated public imagination with her stories of the mythical east. Wherever she went, she was the most popular of dinner guests, and so built up a formidable network of contacts, with expat officers and administrators, local rulers and their wives.

Unlike her male counterparts, Stark had unrestricted access to the harems of her Arab hosts. She recognised that this was often where the power lay, and that if she wanted to find out information or to exert influence, this



—  
“To awaken quite alone  
in a strange town is one  
of the most pleasant  
sensations in the world.”

### PART IV

#### IRAQ

##### CHAPTER XXII

###### APRIL IN BAGHDAD

“A dreadful quiet fell and worser far  
Than Armes, a sullen Interval of War,”  
(DRYDEN: *Astrea*)

I FIRST saw Baghdad in war-time at the end of The “crisis as usual” which I find marked in a good deal worse than usual against the invasion and the African news.

Four Iraqi Generals, known as the Golden Four, had been worked upon by German whispers,<sup>1</sup> had seized Rashid Ali as their political colleague and spoken over the telephone was listened to; and they had searched the palace for the Regent quietly—four doctors and a certificate of death already written out. The Regent had slipped away to the R.A.F. at Habbaniyah. This



**FAR LEFT** Stark's signature on a hardcopy edition of *East is West* (1945)

**LEFT** Stark first journeyed to Iraq in 1927 and returned again in the 1940s

**ABOVE** Freya Stark in Jabal al-Druze, a volcanic region in southern Syria

**RIGHT** A 2003 stamp printed in the United Kingdom of Stark, who was knighted as a Dame in 1953



could be done with ruthless efficiency by building rapport with the women.

### Military Contribution

With the outbreak of the second world war, Stark joined the Ministry of Information, using her Arabic skills to counter Nazi propaganda in the

Middle East. She made impassioned broadcasts from Aden and also led a one-woman film campaign, smuggling film reels into the ministerial harems of Yemen. When challenged about her projector on one occasion, she declared it was a portable ladies' commode and no further enquiries

**"To feel, and think, and learn always: surely that is being alive and young in the real sense"**

**BOTTOM** Photograph of the Wadi Hadhramaut caravan in Yemen, taken by Stark herself

**RIGHT** Freya Stark at a writing desk at her home in Asolo, Italy, circa 1950

were made. The women were enthralled by Stark and her films as were their husbands, and she is credited with single-handedly ensuring the neutrality of Yemen throughout the war.

This was not Stark's only significant wartime contribution, however. Closely copying the

structure of the militant Muslim Brotherhood, already the bane of British administrators, Stark created the *Ikwan al-Hurriyah*, the Brotherhood of Freedom. This network of British sympathisers swelled to 40,000 members and helped to sustain Arab and Egyptian loyalty to the Allies. With Stark at their helm,

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**“Surely, of all the wonders of the world, the horizon is the greatest.”**





they espoused the values of freedom and secular democracy at tea parties, social gatherings, discussion groups, public lectures and through the radio. Very much a woman of the people, Stark had the ability to bring together everyone from street sweepers to army officers and friendly British operatives to Bedouin chiefs. As far



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**"There can be no happiness if the things we believe in are different from the things we do."**

away as the US, the popular press revered her quite rightly, as "the female Lawrence of Arabia".

In fact, Stark was more than a female T.E. Lawrence. Her areas of interest – from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan and everywhere in between were far wider, plus she wrote prolifically. The relationships she established were more enduring and while Lawrence's advice on how to manage the Middle East was respectfully ignored, Stark's initiatives became a key part of Allied policy for

the duration of the war. Stark was, right until her death at the age of 100, not only a passionate nomad, but a bold and influential one, too. ♦ AG

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**SOPHIE IBBOTSON** is an entrepreneur and international business consultant. She is the founder of Maximum Exposure UK and *Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel*. She is the author of five Bradt Travel Guides, including *Kashmir*, *Uzbekistan* and *Sudan*.



# Women of Gaza

A LIFE CHOKED WITH ADVERSITY  
ALONG THE GAZA STRIP

Text Nigel O'Connor



**Palestinian mothers often lose a son or a father, and sometimes the whole family. This gives women the motivation to be strong**



**As** with all Palestinians in what is often described as the world's largest open-air prison, life for the women of the Gaza Strip is choked with adversity.

Fenced by land and bound by sea, the enclave grates under the humanitarian impact of military conflict, embargo and political isolation. Neighbouring Israel and Egypt have maintained a land and sea blockade – limiting movement of goods and people since 2006. Although targeting Hamas, the militant Islamist movement governing Gaza, the policies are described by the United Nations as amounting to collective punishment.

## Not all misery and destruction

For journalist and photographer Lara Abu Ramadan, this life of adversity is mostly met with a high spirit and dignity. Using social media platforms,

## The daily routine of maintaining a household is often affected by shortages of electricity, cooking gas and clean water

along with her writing, the young woman's intent is to show Gaza's human face to a world used to seeing scenes of catastrophe and violence. Lara, 24, seeks out stories and images highlighting the perseverance and moments of happiness found in Gaza.

"I want to show the beautiful side of life – so people know that Gaza is not only misery and destruction," she said. "Most places would descend into chaos if subjected to similar violence and siege but we have endured and not completely turned on each other."

Glimmers of hope are welcome amid growing despair. Three major Israeli military offensives in recent years have caused displacement, traumatised much of the population and left public infrastructure barely functioning. Most people in Gaza face food insecurity and with the world's highest unemployment – close to 50% – the collapsed economy offers little hope to young people seeking a better future.

### A delayed life

Life's usual patterns and the daily routines of maintaining a household are tempered with the reality of chronic shortages of medicine, electricity, cooking gas and clean water.

"Women here are responsible for working in the house and the lack of electricity really effects their lives," Lara said. "Electricity comes only eight hours a day and it's never continuous. If you have a family and kids with school the next day and who need their uniforms ready, then you must

wait for electricity to come. Everything is delayed in our lives."

The latest and most damaging Israeli offensive against Hamas, a 51-day campaign of sustained aerial bombardment in the summer of 2014, reduced entire neighborhoods to flattened piles of concrete and twisted steel while one third of the civilian population was internally displaced during the conflict.

"Life here is tough for women. A Palestinian mother often has to deal with many hard things because of the situation they live under," Lara said. "They have often had to lose a son or a father, sometimes the whole family. I think that gives girls a vision of responsibility, independence and a motivation to be strong."

### The siege of 2014

During the bombing, Lara and her husband established a live stream video from their apartment showing the city under attack in real time. Along with being an innovative form of reporting, it was also a means of coping with danger.

"Working as a journalist gave me another feeling at the time," she remembered. "I wasn't just feeling afraid, wanting to leave my house or hide under my bed because of the bombing, but I just wanted to stay in my house and show what was unfolding on the ground. It removed the real feeling of what was going on – that we were in a very dangerous situation."

Physical signs of the bombing remain obvious but the psychological

**LEFT** A lady wearing a *niqab*, a face veil, while shopping at a market in Gaza

**BOTTOM LEFT** Three generations of women at home in Gaza

**BELOW** Journalist Lara Abu Ramadan (left) looks on at an elderly woman





LEFT A graffiti of a Palestinian woman with a weapon along the Separation Barrier, dividing Israel and Palestine

past, I could walk freely in the streets but now I feel that everyone is always looking at each other, especially if you are a woman. These looks pressure you and your psychology. They want to know why you are walking on the streets or even doing anything."

Such attitudes often prove to be obstacles for women wanting to work, but Lara is thankful that her parents believe she should express her talents.

"Society here does not always accept working women," she said. "Luckily I was raised in an open-minded family. They allowed me more independence and the freedom to choose my studies and what I wanted to be. If I do something wrong, society will blame my family, so they gave me freedom in 'holes' to avoid problems. And because they follow our Arab culture and traditions, I was raised to be committed to them."

For Lara, everyday examples of women exercising independence provide inspiration for her to continue being herself.

"There are independent women here who work. They depend on themselves and they feed the whole family," she said.

"You'll find women working amongst all classes of society," Lara continues. "Some are educated and work in companies and offices, and most of them are financially independent. Then, there are women who go to work every morning to find any job, just to provide the most basic things for her family." ♦ AG

## For creative young women seeking a measure of independence, social pressure to conform adds another layer to the claustrophobic environment

scars inflicted on people often go unseen. The normalisation of extraordinary circumstances places added pressure on women in their role as mothers while trying to cope with everyday lives themselves.

"I recently visited a woman and her family still living in a caravan after their house was destroyed," Lara recounted. "She'd sent one of her babies to live with her extended family because the caravan was not a healthy place. Her husband was injured during the war and cannot work so she was trying to survive with some money given by neighbours and family. She struggles to afford milk and medicine for her other child and felt humiliated living there."

### A claustrophobic environment

With 1.8 million people squeezed into an area half the size of Singapore – mostly descendants of refugees who

fled ancestral homes following the creation of Israel in 1948 – the Gaza Strip is one of the most densely-populated territories in the world. Temporary refugee camps have grown into vast, overcrowded labyrinths of multi-storyed homes.

These are fertile recruiting grounds for militant groups and Hamas political cadres. As unemployment, poverty and isolation have increased during the blockade, so too has social conservatism.

For creative or young women seeking a measure of independence, social pressure to conform to conservative norms adds another layer to the claustrophobic environment.

"Everything in Gaza is getting more closed in," Lara explained. "I think this is from the blockade and the many wars. The bad things that happened in this small place has impacted how people treat and see each other. In the

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**NIGEL O'CONNOR** is an independent Australian journalist and writer. He spent the past four years living and working in Palestine and recently relocated to Cyprus.



**Floods will put 150 million people at risk of waterborne diseases if deforestation continues**

[reach.org.my](http://reach.org.my)



# Rivers of Life

FRANCK VOGEL'S TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS PROJECT



**China** and India's race to fulfil hydroelectric dreams has seen over 150 dams planned for River Brahmaputra and its tributaries – and this number is just from India alone.

The 2,900 kilometre river, which runs through China, India and Bangladesh, is at the epicentre of flash floods, environmental degradation and loss of livelihoods, borne by rural villagers and their homes which stand in the way of meeting energy demands.

**The Brahmaputra River in India is at the epicentre of flash floods, environmental degradation and loss of livelihoods**

The case of Brahmaputra isn't unique – and the global nature of these water issues is what French photographer Franck Vogel wants us to realise. The Asian premiere of his photography exhibition, Transboundary Rivers, presents stories

of the Nile in Egypt, the Brahmaputra in India and the Colorado in the United States, three rivers each with their own sets of problems.

Franck is renowned for his coverage of social and environmental issues, from the Bishnois people in India –



**ABOVE** Chiranjit Payeng, 25, with his wife Rima and son Raj. Their house in Majuli Island was destroyed by floods and erosion

**RIGHT** A woman pumping water near Jorhat on the banks of the Brahmaputra

## Franck was inspired to embark on his most recent Transboundary Rivers project in 2012 after investigating issues concerning the contentious Millennium Dam project on the Nile

who dedicate themselves to protecting wildlife and the environment – to albinos in Tanzania who are persecuted by their societies.

Franck was inspired to embark on his most recent Transboundary Rivers project in 2012 after investigating issues concerning the contentious Millennium Dam project on the Nile.

“I realised that the global freshwater situation has reached a critical point and that it needs immediate attention and action,” says Franck. Apart from the rivers featured in the Singapore exhibition, he has also travelled to the Jordan, whose water is shared (or rather, fought) between Israel, Jordan and Palestine.

Journeys to these regions have not been easy. While working on the Nile

story, there was an instance when he needed to photograph a giant bucket wheel excavator, which is used in surface mining.

“It was in the middle of the bush, where dozens of men died during a tribal fight just near the machine,” Franck tells us. He had a military escort of eight soldiers who feared for an ambush, but thank goodness all went well.

Apart from build-ups of high tension, conflicts among the riparian states are also often riddled with complexities. Take the Brahmaputra for example. In the media, China is often portrayed as the main antagonist – four dams have been constructed along the same river stretch in Tibet and the country has been accused of



causing a drying out of the river by the Indian government. However, stepping into India, another story unfolds.

With the 150 dams approved for construction by the Indian government, there has been little consideration for the fates of those living along the Brahmaputra. Franck's photographs capture the daily lives of these people whose livelihoods depend on the river, from fishermen to tea planters. Erosion is a major problem for many households – near Gogamukh, the original village of Konuwpara has been completely submerged. A total of 55 houses have

shifted to higher grounds, but the owner of this new land wants displaced residents to move elsewhere.

And that is just but one facet of social problems. To garner support for dam projects, companies resort to unscrupulous bribery by introducing money, alcohol and opium to villagers. This not only curries favour; the alcohol and opium turn locals into addicts such that they no longer attend public hearings where dam construction was disputed.

It is difficult for an outsider to understand the full extent and gravity of transboundary river conflicts, but

Franck's works try to help us bridge that gap. Apart from displaying his images in exhibitions and magazine publications, Franck also conducts conferences around the world to widen his outreach.

Franck says that this Transboundary Rivers project is only half complete. He estimates that it will take two more years of documentation: this summer, he will be travelling to the Mekong while next year he intends to visit the Ganges and the Amazon. At the end of it, Franck will have published a two-volume book set that collects all that he has done on this project – the first volume will be published in September this year.

At present, his exhibition runs in Singapore's Gardens by the Bay until 30 May. It is part of Voilah!, an annual festival in Singapore that

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**With the 150 dams approved for construction there has been little consideration for the fates of those living along the Brahmaputra**





**LEFT** Assam, the largest tea-growing region in India is flanked by the Brahmaputra on both sides

**ABOVE** Villagers walk along Geotubes in Assam that are filled with sand and designed to prevent flooding

**BELLOW** Sadapala and her mother Nisarami fishing in the Subansiri River near Singori



aims to promote French creativity and innovation in the fields of culture, science and gastronomy. Franck's exhibition is just one of 40 programmes at Voilah! – there are also film screenings, musical concerts, dance performances and picnics for the public to enjoy.

While the festival has a focus on French culture, elements of Asia are still prevalent in many of the activities. This is because many events are jointly presented by partners from Singapore and France – such as the Reframing Modernism art exhibition co-curated by National Gallery Singapore and Centre Pompidou. Be sure to drop by activities at Voilah! 2016 if you're in the little red dot from now until 31 May. ♦ AG

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**FRANCK VOGEL** is a freelance photographer focusing on global social and environmental issues. Since 2011, Franck has been an ambassador for Green Cross. [www.franckvogel.com](http://www.franckvogel.com)

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# Institutions that Empower

HELPING THE WOMEN OF ASIA

Text Jim Neale

**There** is a fresh current of optimism flowing from multilateral development institutions these days and it's taking the form of the new 17-point, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Of these vital benchmarks, one in particular, Sustainable Goal No.5, pledges to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls throughout the world.

## Ending prejudice against women

These SDGs as they are called, have replaced the older UN Millennium Development Goals that expired in 2015. This will give institutions, humanitarian agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) a 15-year horizon to attempt to end all prejudice and bias against women in society, and replace it with an ethos of empowerment and impartiality by 2025. The adoption and launch of this ambitious policy has been enthusiastically received in Asia by all the regional United Nations agencies and multilateral lending institutions, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

## Addressing sensitive cultural issues

The ADB has been at the forefront of women empowerment issues, deploying gender and development specialists who focus on discrimination throughout the Asia Pacific region. ADB has taken the initiative in its strategy and planning to achieve favourable results when addressing the ills of reproductive

**The UN's fifth sustainable development goal pledges to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women**

health, nutrition, infant mortality and violence against women. Many of these issues are highly sensitive, with traditions and cultures being a difficult roadblock to navigate when implementing these lofty aims. But breaking down barriers and building bridges of understanding are among the core beliefs of the Manila-based development bank, which has been operating in communities since 1966.

## Severing the cycle of poverty

The United Nations World Food Program (WFP) is another organisation that is trying to sever the cycle of

poverty and hunger at its roots, by creating a safe and supporting environment in which to elevate gender equality and to ensure safe access to food. It is often observed that women are more vulnerable than men during natural disasters and political upheavals. Consequently, WFP's action plans specifically target the inclusiveness of women at the operational level during these emergencies. Sustainable gender programs like Food For Training (FFT), which can actually chart the income generating levels of women, will often follow post-disaster





relief efforts. WFP identifies and prioritises gender-challenged areas in developing countries and quickly calibrates its response to build capacity and help resolve the problems of inequality that these women encounter.

### Empowerment for all

Comprehensive studies by both the ADB and WFP have shown that by elevating the status of women through gender equality programs, a corresponding increase in the family's economic standard will ensue. To achieve this outcome, a balance of cultural awareness and enlightened educational processes will be employed, to help assure that equitable opportunities and financial compensation is maintained.

This proven strategy has been reinvigorated by these recent UN initiatives, and it is this momentum that will propel Asia and the Pacific forward into the 21st century. The empowerment of women means empowerment of all. ♦ AG

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JIM NEALE is a photojournalist who travels extensively throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia. He is a contributing photographer for the UN World Food program as well as other UN agencies.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Set in 2015, each SDG has specific targets to be achieved over the next 15 years and its overall aim is to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all.



# New Stream of Life

LAKE COMMUNITY IN THE PHILIPPINES TRANSFORMED BY WOMEN'S GROUP

Text Faizza Tanggol



**Against** the backdrop of the tranquil Marayag Lake, members of Women of War warmly welcome visitors to the Municipality of Matanog in Maguindanao. Garbed in their traditional *malong* wear, they proudly showcase the Marayag Lake not only for tourism but also for how it provides an alternative livelihood for the community.

## Scarred by war and conflict

Though Marayag Lake is now one of the most well-known areas in Matanog, it has a colourful past, known not only within the municipality but also outside of its borders.

"Matanog has a controversial history. People used to be scared of passing through this area because Marayag Lake was seen as a place where dead bodies were dumped and robbery was rampant," explains Larida May Abedin, the chairperson of Women of War in Matanog.

**Marayag Lake was seen as a place where dead bodies were dumped and robbery was rampant, but it has since become a peaceful tourist haven**

The women's group Women of War helped turn the reputation of Matanog and Marayag Lake from a place to avoid to a peaceful tourist haven.

"The Women of War, or WOW Matanog, came to be because many women suffered during the armed conflict here in 2002. So we established the Women of War in 2013 with the vision of building a new and peaceful Matanog," says Larida.

## Women as peace advocates

Women also have a unique status in their community as peace advocates. Aside from the 2002 armed conflict between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front,

family feuds, known as *rido*, is also common in Matanog.

"Although their families may be in conflict from *rido*, the women still get along, so they serve as a link for the settling of conflicts," Larida shares. "Our group WOW Matanog is really at the frontlines when it comes to peacebuilding in Matanog."

Initially composed of 35 women back in 2013, WOW Matanog now has 250 members. These women led the transformation of Marayag Lake by managing the rehabilitation from beginning to end.

In 2014, with assistance from the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), hundreds of men and women

participated in the food-for-work programme which aimed to change Marayag Lake into a place with more productive sources of an alternative livelihood. The local government of Matanog also provided monetary incentives to the participants who helped in the rehabilitation. The participants built protection dikes along the 36-hectare lake, constructed a floating fish cage and bridge and established a vegetable garden in exchange for food.

### Positive wave of tourism

Now, hundreds of visitors drop by Marayag Lake every year to take in the scenery. The lake also serves as a rest stop where guests can order and eat the food prepared by the women of WOW Matanog while enjoying the view of the lake. Aside from the tourism potential, Marayag Lake also has fish and vegetables which the community members harvest to sell and use for their consumption.

"We have tilapia and *dalag* (murrel) in the lake and various vegetables such as pumpkin, eggplant, string beans and bitter gourd planted along the mountainside," shares Larida. "We

**In 2014, the World Food Programme (WFP) helped to build protection dikes, construct a fishing cage and establish a vegetable garden**



**LEFT** The 36-hectare Marayag Lake is located in Matanog, Maguindanao in the Philippines

**ABOVE** The women harvest the vegetables they plant along the Marayag mountainside

**BETWEEN** Some members of Women of War in Matanog garbed in their traditional malong wear

sell the fish from the lake and it's one of our main sources of income. We also harvest the vegetables which we sell along the highway."

One of the key missions of WOW Matanog is to provide livelihoods to their community and with the rehabilitation of the Marayag Lake, they are able to continuously fulfil this mission. With the various sources of income from the lake, the women of Matanog now feel more empowered.

"We have felt a huge effect here in our community," says Larida. "Before, our women used to just stay at home. Now, they have the opportunity to go out, socialise and earn additional income for their family." ♦ AG



**FAIZZA TANGGOL** is a Communications Assistant for the World Food Programme (WFP) Philippines. She is currently based in WFP's Manila country office but often travels to Mindanao to document stories of WFP's work in the Philippines.

# Cash in Hand

PHILIPPINES' WOMEN FARMERS BENEFIT FROM CASH TRANSFER AID

Text & Photos Faizza Tangol

**Under** the heat of the sun, Analyn inspects the cabbage she has planted a few months ago together with 39 other women in their communal garden. They live in a village called Paling in Piagapo, located in Lanao del Sur in Mindanao.

Aside from cabbage, the women farmers have planted other high-value vegetables such as pumpkin, eggplant and bitter gourd in their small 20 square metre garden, as part of the United Nations World Food Programme's (WFP) cash-based project to assist communities in rebuilding their lives after the decades-long conflict.

## Building a livelihood

Conflict and displacement often lead to food and nutrition insecurity of vulnerable populations. Once the conflict is over, families sometimes find it difficult to get back on their feet. For Analyn and her husband, who works as a tricycle driver, their income is not enough to feed their family of eight children.

WFP works with the national and local government in the Philippines to bring about social protection programmes, and one of it is cash-based transfers. In Piagapo, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries-Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (DAF-ARMM) provided complimentary vegetable seedlings, while the local government supported the training to farmers.

"We learned about this project from our village chief," shares Analyn. "So we formed a group made up of forty women and then we prepared the land and planted the vegetables. The actual work was easy especially if you have companions with whom you can talk

**After doing their work at the vegetable garden, farmers will receive electronic prepaid cards with cash entitlements to buy food**



to. It was fun because we could chit-chat while planting the vegetables."

## How does it work?

After doing their work at the vegetable garden, participants will receive electronic prepaid cards (e-cards)

with cash entitlements depending on their days of work. Analyn and her group worked for 30 days, so each woman was entitled to around PHP6,000 or US\$128.

"During the first payout, I withdrew my money at the ATM machine,"



**BELOW** Analyn at her community garden in Lanao del Sur with pumpkins, eggplants and bitter gourds

**RIGHT** Right after getting her entitlement, Analyn buys 10 kilogrammes of rice to feed her family



Analyn explains. "Even though they had already thought us how to use it, I was nervous because it was my first time withdrawing money from the ATM. I didn't know which buttons to press and I had to ask for help from the bank's security guard! For the



### WHAT ARE CASH TRANSFERS?

Cash transfers provide money to people who are struggling to provide food for their families. It is an alternative to traditional food assistance, which incur high costs of transporting and storing food. Cash and vouchers, which can be redeemed for food items or spent in local markets, are preferred as they offer more choice and variety. WFP is currently developing other innovative methods, like scratch cards or "e-vouchers" sent via text message to mobile phones.

second payout, I got my money from the local remittance centre."

WFP Philippines is increasingly using cash transfers as a method for improving food security, especially in areas where markets are accessible. Women such as Analyn play a crucial role in ensuring there is food on the table in the household. With the entitlement she received, Analyn was able to buy rice, fish, sugar and soap for her family. She has also set aside some money for emergency needs.

"I do prefer cash because I can buy food as well as other essentials. Everything I need, I can buy with cash. I can also provide allowance for my children when they go to school," Analyn shares.

As she finishes the careful inspection of the vegetables in the communal garden, Analyn expresses thanks to her local government and WFP for the assistance provided.

"We will make sure that we sustain this garden. We will not only get money from it, but we can also get vegetables which our families can eat," she says. ♦ AG



# Leaena the Lioness

ONE WOMAN'S LEGACY TO HELP DISABLED CHILDREN IN SINGAPORE

Text Khong Swee Lin

## Leaena Tambyah's Awards

1984 – Public Service Medal, Singapore  
1994 – Public Service Star, Singapore  
2016 – Pioneer Social Worker Award by Singapore Association of Social Workers

The aftermath of the second world war brought about a period of rebuilding and restoration in Singapore, coupled with a growing sentiment for change. Although challenged by instances of conflict and poverty, a gradual rise in standards of living led to a penchant for modernity in outlook, lifestyle and even attire. Along the way, the island continued to face issues, in particular, public health issues of tuberculosis and poliomyelitis.

In 1953, a then 16-year-old Leaena Chelliah concluded her visit to a polio-stricken child at Singapore's St Andrew's Orthopaedic Hospital with her church group. That trip would

mark a turning point in her life, as the child flung his arms around her and begged her not to leave. "Tell me more stories," he cried. "You can't leave!" Leaena never left.

**Role models in her early life**  
Born to the Reverend Dr. D D Chelliah, the first Asian Archdeacon of the Anglican Diocese of Singapore & Malaya (1958–1966), and Mrs Rosalind Chelliah, Leaena's parents led exemplary lives.

A humanitarian, her father foresaw a time when Singapore's aged would need shelter and care, and together with two other pastors he began a project in 1958 that would become the

St. John's Home for Elderly Persons.

Both husband and wife were instrumental in ensuring that their children, including their eldest daughter Leaena, would grow up aware of the need to assist those who lived in poverty and hardship, a factor that was to determine her field of study and choice of career.

The University of Birmingham was Leaena's port of call for a Degree in Social Science, specialising in social studies. Her practical work placements dealt with children and young persons with disabilities. After her return from the UK, she became the Assistant Director of the Department of Social Welfare.

In 1965, as her husband, Dr John Tambyah and her strongly believed that their children should be brought up by themselves, she stopped work when she was expecting her son and began helping out with voluntary organisations.

### Catalyst for change

In 1967, the sudden pullout of British forces from Singapore created a gap in volunteer work hitherto excellently performed by the wives of British servicemen. The Asian Women's Welfare Association (AWWA) stepped into the breach. Founder Mrs. Shakuntala Bhatia, wife of the then

offered their facility without strings, eventually purchasing a building at Norris Road to carry on their work.

Upon joint study with the National Council of Social Services, AWWA established that over 100 physically disabled students were attending mainstream schools. However, they weren't doing well as their parents could afford neither time nor money for therapy. So, based on the idea of "mobile clinics" equipped with medical equipment that once plied Singapore's rural villages and outlying districts combating tuberculosis, vans fitted with physiotherapy equipment plied the

since the age of two". The 30-year-old is a fine example of how a child with special needs can be successfully integrated into a mainstream educational system.

Starting with his enrollment in the playgroup, Jovin continued under Leaena's pioneering TEACH ME Programme (Therapy and Educational Assistance for Children in Mainstream Education), a project that enables special needs students to compete on an equal level with able-bodied students.

Besides Jovin, quadriplegic Bay Meng Chien was also a participant and obtained an internship with UBS. Subsequently he was hired as full-time staff over other able-bodied candidates.

Paralympian swimmers Theresa Goh (congenital spinal bifida, Public Service Medal 2008) and Yip Pin Xiu (muscular dystrophy, Meritorious Service Medal 2008) were also TEACH ME children.

The list goes on and on. Hundreds of capable disabled young adults are now leading fulfilling lives as a consequence of Leaena's project.

### Bold as a lioness

Over 60 years onward, Leaena, now an indefatigable grandmother of three grandsons, still champions the cause of Singapore's multiply disabled or "special needs" children, helping them attain dignity in their lives, achieve their maximum potential and to support their mothers, who have unflinchingly borne their burden with fortitude, as mothers have done for centuries. Her goal is to include the excluded – that is, to include the disabled in Singapore's compulsory education scheme for children.

We are glad for Leaena's boldness, whose name in Latin means "lioness", for in her boldness, the unacceptable are accepted, and the excluded are included. ♦ AG

## Over 60 years on, Leaena is still championing the cause of Singapore's multiply disabled or "special needs" children, helping them attain dignity in their lives

Indian High Commissioner, and Mrs Vimala Kulasekaram roped in Leaena in 1972.

But who, or what was the catalyst for Leaena's accomplishments in the world of the multiply-handicapped? It was 1979, the International Year of the Child. Leaena met a mother with her multiply-disabled son, who was asked to leave a reception class as her son was coldly considered "ineducable". Yet, his mother never gave up hope for her child. She dressed him well, spoke, laughed and joked with him.

Leaena realised soon after, that although specific disabilities were well-catered for, no single institution catered to multiple disabilities. Deciding to do something for this group of children, she approached almoners of the Paediatric Unit at Outram Road General Hospital (as it was then known) for a list of children suitable for her project.

AWWA volunteers started it off as a playgroup in St Ignatius Church who

country to reach disabled children. Until today, these vans run on.

### Bright spark Jovin Tan

Jovin Tan's success story has everything to do with Leaena Tambyah. The inspiring Paralympian, who is headed for Rio 2016, was born with cerebral palsy but is today a national sailor who also works with the Chapman Consulting Group.

Jovin, who is a recipient of the Singapore Youth Award in 2012, credits his employers as being supportive of their disabled employees who are also sportsmen, as he frequently has to train for and attend competitions overseas.

To Jovin, sailing has given him confidence, discipline and strength, both physical and mental, to take on the rigours of daily life.

For Leaena, Jovin is very special as he had in a sense been under her wings. Speaking to *ASIAN Geographic*, he said to us simply, "I've known her

# Rise in Power

WOMEN LEADING THEIR NATIONS IN ASIA

**Despite** a pervasiveness of gender inequality in pockets of Asia, the region has had and continues to have its sizeable share of female national leaders. Granted, not all left a positive legacy. Nonetheless, from Thailand to Pakistan to South Korea, we find that in recent history there has always been a time and place for women to lead their nations.



## Benazir Bhutto

PRIME MINISTER OF PAKISTAN  
OFFICE TERM: 1988–1990, 1993–1996



Benazir Bhutto is Pakistan's "Iron Lady" and the world's first democratically-elected female leader of a Muslim nation. The eldest daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a former president and prime minister, she served two non-consecutive terms as the Prime Minister of Pakistan, though she did not complete it due to corruption charges. On 27 December 2007 – just two weeks before the 2008 general elections which she had intended to run for – Bhutto was assassinated in a bombing attack.

## Gloria Macapagal Arroyo

PRESIDENT OF THE PHILIPPINES  
OFFICE TERM: 2001–2010



Gloria Macapagal Arroyo stepped up to the role of president in response to the deposition of her predecessor, Joseph Estrada. Her father was Diosdado Macapagal, a former president. Though adept at managing the country's economy – the Philippines escaped the 2008 global financial crisis largely unscathed – Arroyo was perceived as power-hungry and accused of rigging the 2004 Presidential elections, which she won by a one million vote margin.

## Yingluck Shinawatra

PRIME MINISTER OF THAILAND  
OFFICE TERM: 2011–2014



First brought into the limelight as the sister of Thaksin Shinawatra, a business tycoon turned politician who was overthrown in a military coup, Yingluck Shinawatra's reputation preceded her entrance into politics. She was Thailand's first female prime minister and its youngest in over 60 years. While initial polls showed Yingluck to be more popular than Thaksin, her management of the 2011 Thailand floods stirred discontent and eventually led to a period of political instability.



## **Sheikh Hasina**

**PRIME MINISTER OF BANGLADESH**  
OFFICE TERM: 1996–2001, 2009–PRESENT



Having spent four decades in politics, there are few things that Sheikh Hasina has not encountered. Exile, an assassination attempt, murder charges and arrest are just some events that she has lived through. Under Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh saw its child mortality rate halved from 146 (per thousand live births) in 1990 to 54 in 2010. Apart from this, the number of chronically food insecure people in the country fell from 40 million to 27 million people.

## **Park Geun-hye**

**PRESIDENT OF SOUTH KOREA**  
OFFICE TERM: 2013–PRESENT



Park Geun-hye is a pioneer in many ways. Not only is she the first female president of South Korea and the first female head of state in Korea's history, she was also the first South Korean president to be born a South Korean citizen. A 51.6% approval electoral win left no doubts about Park's popularity, and she is known for being especially adept at handling foreign policy issues with a tough yet non-provocative attitude.

## **Tsai Ing-wen**

**PRESIDENT OF TAIWAN**  
OFFICE TERM: 20 MAY 2016



Tsai Ing-Wen will take office later this month, and apart from being the first female president of Taiwan, she is also the first East Asian head of state unrelated to a former national leader. Her first run for presidency was in 2012, where she was defeated by Ma Ying-jeou. However, Tsai's next attempt saw a landslide victory with a 56% vote. Analysts attribute this success partially to people's discontent with Ma's failed economic reforms. ♦ AG

# Conquering Great Heights

ALL-WOMEN'S TEAM TO EVEREST BASE CAMP  
COME HOME TRIUMPHANT



**“It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves”**

– Sir Edmund Hillary  
(1919–2008)

In conjunction with International Women's Day on 8 March this year, five brave women from Singapore's Ace Adventure Expeditions went on a trekking adventure – and not just for a good challenge, but to raise funds for a good cause.

The Everest Base Camp (EBC) trek, held from 13–30 March 2016, was led





**ABOVE** View of Mount Everest and Everest Base Camp from Kala Patthar

**LEFT** Dominique Low, second from right, was part of the five-woman trek team led by Joanne Soo (far left)

**RIGHT** Dominique at Everest Base Camp, surrounded by picturesque landscapes

by Joanne Soo, one of the partners of Ace Adventure Expeditions who was also part of Singapore's first all-women's team to reach the summit of Mount Everest in 2009. The EBC stands at 5,380 metres and is the most popular trekking activity in the Himalayas.



**"It was a tough expedition and I wasn't sure I could complete it, but somehow I found the strength to reach my destination"**

"EBC was the farthest thing from my mind until Ace Adventure Expeditions announced the 2016 International Women's Day Challenge to encourage more women to trek, mountain climb, appreciate the outdoors and to raise funds for Zonta Singapore's Project Pari, benefitting underprivileged teenage girls," said Ms Dominique Low, who was one of the five women who scaled the heights.

"EBC sounded intimidating, and the word 'Everest' has this effect of either scaring the wits out of you or making you really curious. So of course, I signed up!" Dominique confessed.

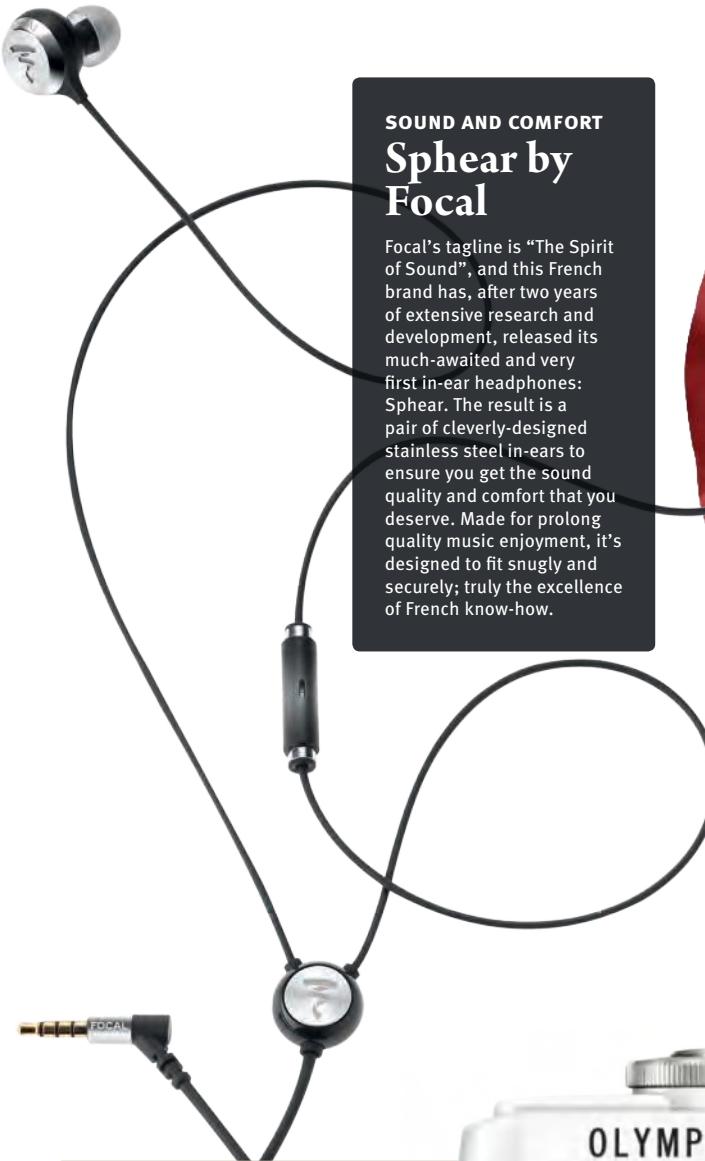
The EBC trek saw more than 120 kilometres of seemingly endless rocky terrain, steep ascents, tricky descents,

suspension bridges over deep gorges, huge sandstorms, snow and plenty of four-legged traffic who owned the right of way – mules, yaks, *jopkyos* (a cross between a yak and a cow). But Dominique took it all in her stride.

"It was the perfect way to celebrate International Women's Day," she said. "This was a tough expedition and I wasn't sure I could complete it. But somewhere along the way, while experiencing the Sherpas' warm hospitality and getting to know our guides Finjo and Roshan, and being surrounded by jaw-dropping picturesque landscapes, I knew I'd find the strength to reach my destination. And I did." ♦ AG

[www.aceadventure.com.sg](http://www.aceadventure.com.sg)

## HIGHLIGHTS



### SOUND AND COMFORT

#### Sphear by Focal

Focal's tagline is "The Spirit of Sound", and this French brand has, after two years of extensive research and development, released its much-awaited and very first in-ear headphones: Sphear. The result is a pair of cleverly-designed stainless steel in-ears to ensure you get the sound quality and comfort that you deserve. Made for prolong quality music enjoyment, it's designed to fit snugly and securely; truly the excellence of French know-how.

### COLOUR YOUR LIFE

#### Olympus PEN E-PL7

An Olympus camera to capture all the wonderful memories, the PEN E-PL7 features sophisticated smartphone and social-sharing integration and a unique selfie-oriented technology. Fun, feminine and fully customisable to fit each personality, the PEN E-PL7 with its flip-down touch screen and selfie mode will be one of the best cameras for selfies with the whole family. The camera also contains 14 live-preview art filters including "partial colour" and "vintage" for a nostalgic touch to your pictures.



### A TOUCH OF VINTAGE

#### Lipault Lady Plume Weekend Bag

Simple, light and infinitely feminine, the Lady Plume line of bags by French brand Lipault is helmed by designer François Lipovetsky and now offers a touch of vintage with these new sweet and soft colours. For short trips and weekend getaways, this stylish weekender bag, with its lightweight qualities and strength of its nylon twill, is easy to carry and comfortable on the shoulder. Choose from Antique Pink, Dark Lavender, Ruby, Purple or Navy.



BREATH OF FRESH AIR

## Samsonite RED Arette

Samsonite RED has unveiled its Spring/Summer 2016 collection with the recent appointment of renowned Korean stars Kim Woo-Bin and Kim You-Jung. This Arette lightweight bag comes in the form of backpacks, cross bags or foldable totes. The Arette exudes effortless style with a touch of practicality, offering mobility and contemporary style in the form of spacious storage and high-density fabric with a luxurious sheen. Choose from black, beige, navy or light violet.



CAPTURE THE MOMENT

## Sony HDR-AS50 Action Cam

Never worry about missing a moment again. Sony's latest HDR-AS50 Action Cam can now capture your adventure in the dark with low-light sensitivity, change area coverage with new adjustable field of view and help suppress tiny vibrations caused by bike riding or other outdoor activities, in order to ensure smooth and blur-free footages. Also don't miss the Time-lapse Capture, which lets you produce time-lapse movies easily from still images shot at designated intervals.

LITTLE ITALIAN BEAUTY

## Tissot Bella Ora Piccola

This little beauty will be a smart and elegant addition to your wrist with its attractive feminine look. Made from scratch-resistant sapphire crystal with anti-reflective coating on its dome, the Tissot Bella Ora Piccola is sophisticated and detailed. It comes with a gorgeous white, blue or black crown depending on the model, and the romantic style with its fine hands passing over the timeless roman indices is certainly a keeper.



# ASIAN Geographic *images* of Asia

PHOTOGRAPHY  
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SUBMISSIONS OPENING SOON!



## PEOPLE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 2016

This category takes in portraits and persons in Asia, reflecting one of Asia's greatest offering, the warmth and beauty of its people.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 2016

One of the most important constitutions of ASIAN Geographic is conservation. Paying homage to this very important aspect of the geographic, this category hopes to highlight some of the most relevant conservation issues. Photos must be taken within the Asian region.

## WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 2016

Some of the most unique and rarest of wildlife exist in Asia, topside and underwater. This category looks at some of the best wildlife found in the vast region of Asia.

## ARCHITECTURE/LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 2016

From the most iconic Asian representation to the most distinctive of Nature's architecture, the category welcomes the best look at Asia's structural designs, manmade or otherwise.

## YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 2016

No matter where you're from in the world, you are eligible to enter in this category if:

- You are below 21 on date of submission (proof of age is mandatory with submissions)
- Photos are of Asia  
(see UN Geoscheme of Asia region)

## Gallery Showcase

Winners of the Asian Geographic Images of Asia Photography Competition 2016 will be showcased in galleries across Singapore.

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# Sharbat Gula, the Afghan Girl

THE MONA LISA OF PHOTOJOURNALISM

By Kathy Poh



A Steve McCurry photo exhibition in Budapest, Hungary in February 2016 depicting the Afghan Girl

**From** a sea of children in an Afghan refugee camp, photographer Steve McCurry singled out a girl in a red shawl. She was shy, but willing to have her photo taken; at first she put her hands up to cover her face, then her teacher asked her to show her face so the world could know her and her story. After a few snapshots, she ran off to play with her friends, and that was it. Little did McCurry know that his portrait, which came to be known simply as “the Afghan girl” with her piercing green eyes would later become one of the most iconic photographs in history.

Dubbed the Mona Lisa of photojournalism, the Afghan Girl’s image was taken in December 1984, at the Nasir Bagh refugee camp on the Afghan-Pakistan border, where for decades, Afghans had begun moving to Pakistan following the Soviet invasion of their country in 1979.

The girl’s haunting stare reflects a steely defiance in spite of fear, and

it is an arresting image that remains in your mind long after you’ve flipped past the page, compelling one to make a personal response.

“People volunteered to work in the refugee camps because of that photograph,” shared McCurry. Apart from inspiring philanthropy, the Afghan Girl image quickly became a symbol of her people’s strength against the odds.

Who exactly is she? The answer to this question remained elusive for 17 years, until a National Geographic team brought McCurry back to Pakistan in 2002 to locate her. There were many red herrings along the way, as many women identified themselves as the Afghan Girl and husbands claimed their wives to be her.

Finally, McCurry identified a woman from the mountains near Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan as the little lady from the refugee camp. Her face had been weathered by time and toil, but the intensity of the Afghan Girl’s

glance was strong as ever; and her name is Sharbat Gula.

Sharbat’s life has seen her endure more hardships than most of us would likely ever face in a lifetime. As a child, she experienced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, where bombings razed her village and rendered her an orphan. Led by her grandmother, Sharbat and her siblings then made a week-long trek across wintry mountains on foot to reach a refugee camp to live in a cramped space with strangers – where her enigmatic portrait was taken. The years that passed since then never provided much relief; Sharbat moved back to Afghanistan with her husband and three daughters in the mid-1990s, subsisting on terraces of grain crops and a stream that ceased to flow in times of drought.

After her encounter with the National Geographic team, Sharbat soon retreated back into a life of obscurity.

“I don’t think she was particularly interested in her personal fame,” McCurry said. “But she was pleased when we said she had come to be a symbol of the dignity and resilience of her people.”

The story of Sharbat gives us a peek into the lives of six million other Afghan refugees, a result of almost four decades’ worth of conflict. The lucky ones are granted asylum or permanent visas whereupon they can begin new lives, while others – like Sharbat, whose Pakistani documents were discovered by the authorities in 2015 to be forged – are perpetually on the run. ♦ AG



Japanese protestors hold portraits of Chinese, Filipino, South Korean and Taiwanese former comfort women

# Japan's Comfort Women

A WOUND TOO DEEP, LEFT FAR TOO LONG

Text Kathy Poh

**A** formal closure to the issue of Japan's wartime sex slaves – euphemistically known as comfort women – occurred just at the end of last year, when Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a verbal apology and offered a US\$8.3 million compensation to South Korea's President Park Geun-Hye.

This is almost 70 years after the dark days of the second world war. Back then, women in Imperial Japanese colonies were duped into joining military "comfort stations", which were essentially brothels, where they served sexual needs of Japanese soldiers.

Why establish such stations? According to the Japanese Imperial Army, these would not only prevent rape crime – which may breed hostility between the army and their colonies – but also help to avoid venereal diseases. Perhaps not unexpectedly, these problems were not solved. In fact, they were exacerbated.

Initially, comfort women were willing Japanese prostitutes. However, as the war continued, the army fell short of volunteers. Furthermore, the

Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was reluctant to issue travel visas to these prostitutes in fear that it would mar Japan's image, thus the army could only resort to acquiring women from their occupied territories.

There were many means through which civilians were tricked into becoming a comfort woman. One victim who lived in Japan-occupied Korea recounted being ordered to report for work in a Japanese military factory. Instead, she was taken to a military base where she was repeatedly raped for two weeks before being put in a comfort station.

A 1944 report by the United States Office of War Information, based on accounts by Korean comfort women in Myanmar (then Burma), also revealed that the girls were lured by easy work, the promise of a new life in Singapore, as well as monetary rewards. They eventually found themselves in comfort stations with no means to travel back home.

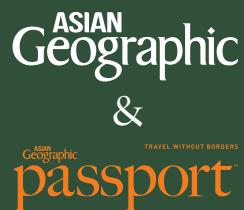
Documentation on comfort women is poor. Historians' estimates put the total number of victims between 50,000 and 200,000, coming from

In 2015, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a verbal apology and offered a US\$8.3 million compensation to South Korea's president

countries like China, Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Australia. Some were as young as ten years old. After the war, it is believed that three-quarters of the comfort women died, while remaining survivors were mostly left infertile due to sexual trauma or venereal diseases.

Apologies and compensations have been repeatedly demanded, but for over 60 years Japan remained stubborn that the government never kept sex slaves. Even now, Japan's deal with South Korea has been deemed by some survivors as insufficient and insincere. It is difficult for people to find solace in words and money when wounds have been slashed far too deep and left open far too long. ♦ AG

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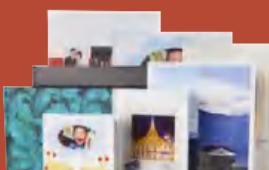
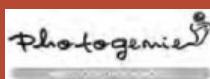
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YOUNG READERS AGED 7-12. GRAB YOUR COPY NOW!

**Fun Facts**

- In Thailand it's bad luck to have your hair cut on a Wednesday.
- In Vietnam, New Year is also everybody's birthday! Everybody's age is measured in lunar years and so everyone gets a year older when the clock strikes "Tet"!
- Nine out of 10 of the world's tallest buildings are found in Asia.
- The government monitors the waist size of Japanese people, and steps in if they are considered to be overweight.
- Around 30 million people in China still live in eco-friendly caves!
- In Korea, silk worms are a real delicacy! Dried then steamed or boiled, and sold on the street they are soft and chewy.
- Even though China is massive, the whole country only has one time zone.
- For more than 300 years, Chinese men were legally forced to wear their hair in that classic ponytail hairstyle that you will recognise from the movies!

Q: Did you hear about the party at the Chinese zoo?  
A: It was Panda-monium.

Q: What's purple and 5000 miles long?  
A: The grape wall of China.

Q: Why were the early days of history called the dark ages?  
A: Because there were so many knights!

Q: Why were the Mongols in such good shape?  
A: They were always going up and down the steppes.

Q: What was the name of the famous Mongolian who conquered nothing?  
A: Genghis Kahn not.

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No. 44  
Issue 3 | 2016

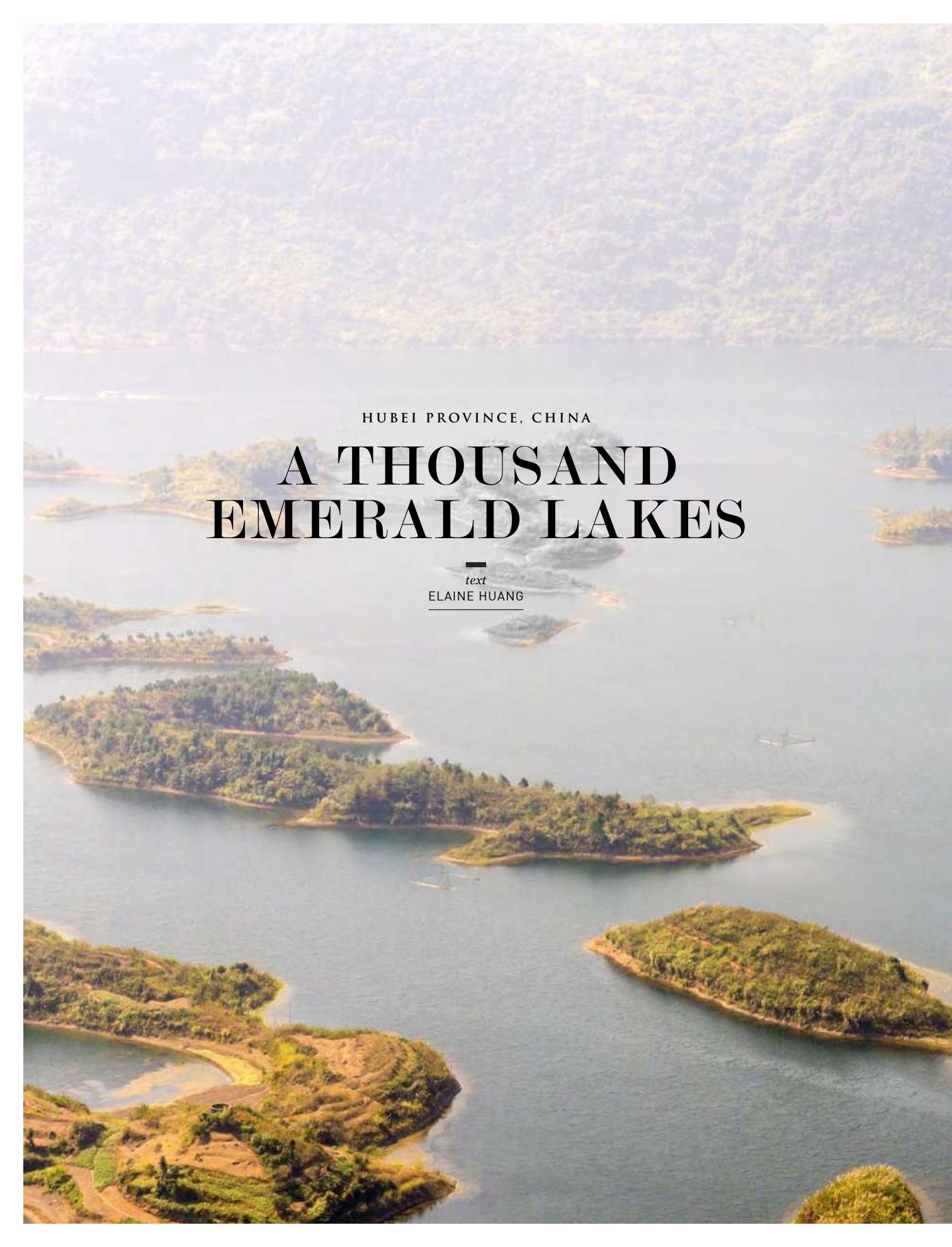


02 HUBEI PROVINCE, CHINA

A Thousand Emerald Lakes

10 SHAN STATE, MYANMAR

Across the Gokteik Viaduct

The background image is a wide-angle aerial photograph of a vast lake, likely the Three Gorges Reservoir. The water is a deep, muted blue. Numerous small, irregularly shaped islands are scattered across the surface, each densely covered with lush green trees and vegetation. In the far distance, a large, hilly landmass is visible under a clear sky.

HUBEI PROVINCE, CHINA

# A THOUSAND EMERALD LAKES

—  
*text*  
ELAINE HUANG



Xiandao Lake in Hubei's southeast is home to 1,002 emerald islands

02



03



## GETTING TO HUBEI

### FLIGHT INFORMATION:

Flights to Hubei land in its capital, Wuhan, at Wuhan Tianhe International Airport. As the busiest air port in central China, international direct flights are available from cities like Bangkok, Osaka, Seoul and Singapore. From Singapore, a flight with Silkair takes just under five hours. Otherwise, there are also domestic flights served by airlines like China Southern and Air China.

### HOTELS:

Modena by Fraser Zhankou, Wuhan  
[www.modenabyfraser.com](http://www.modenabyfraser.com)  
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[www.newworldhotels.com](http://www.newworldhotels.com)  
Ramada Plaza Wuhan Optics Valley  
[www.ramadaplaza-ovwh.com](http://www.ramadaplaza-ovwh.com)

### CURRENCY:

Chinese Yuan Renminbi (US\$1 = 6.51 CNY)

CHINA



02 The Enshi Grand Canyon in Hubei is a karst formation with waterfalls and caves

03 Agriculture is the way of life in Hubei as it is flanked by the Yangtze River

04 Vendors sell fruits and snacks by the banks of the Three Gorges Valley

I grew up in a small village called Luzhou in Hubei province and my family are still living there now. Our village is located in the Jianghan Plain south of Hubei. The Yangtze River, the longest river in China, is just in front of our house. Luzhou means “reed-covered wetland”, while Hubei means “north of the lake”, referring to Dongting Lake.

In fact, Hubei province is known by its nickname “the province of a thousand lakes”. So, my childhood memories were heavily associated with water, simply because the rivers and lakes were everywhere and the rich water resources had a very deep impact on people's lives.

Farming was the main way to make a living, and the major products were grain, wheat and cotton. There were also fruit farms producing pears, peaches, watermelons and oranges. As a child I didn't do much work in the field, but still got important responsibilities like taking care of the animals we had: a buffalo, about 10 chickens or ducks and sometimes a few goats. But they were never a burden to me, because they were all very cute. I remember bringing the buffalo to the river bank and freeing it, letting it eat the grass by itself while I gathered together with my little friends who were doing the same job, catching crabs or fish and hiding under the rocks in the riverside.

Spring is probably the most beautiful season in our village. The peach and pear trees are in full bloom, covering the land

in pink and white, and later in the season, fields of wheat and rapeseed will paint the land yellow and light green. The land is very flat so it looks like a huge colourful blanket from the dyke of the Yangtze River. It is a wonderful experience to cycle along the dyke at this time, as it looks like the back of a dragon and is definitely the best place to overlook the flower-filled land inside, while on the other side the Yangtze River is running alongside you.

There's also a big islet called Bailizhou inside the Yangtze River. It's one of the largest islets in the river and is home to 40 small villages, and the dyke of Bailizhou

“*My childhood memories were heavily associated with water, simply because the rivers and lakes were everywhere. The rich water resources had a very deep impact on people's lives*”

04





05

“The Chinese love lotus very much. They call it the “gentleman’s flower” because it grows out of the mud but it’s beautiful, pure and unstained.”

05 Azalea blooms at Mount Guifeng in Macheng, northeast of Hubei

06 Lotus roots are eaten raw in Hubei as they are crunchy and sweet

is 74 kilometres long going round in a big circle. With the stunning view it's the perfect site for cycling events, and there are competitions held there every year.

Talking about food, Hubei cuisine is not really well known outside the province, but there is one cooking ingredient that is most used here. The Chinese love lotus very much – they call it the “gentleman’s flower” because it grows out of the mud but it's beautiful, pure and unstained.

In summer time, the lakes and ponds in our village are full of lotus flowers and their big green leaves. However, the villagers grow lotus not for its beauty, but for its root and seed. Lotus root is a very important and a common cooking ingredient in Chinese cuisine. The best lotus root is found here in Hubei.

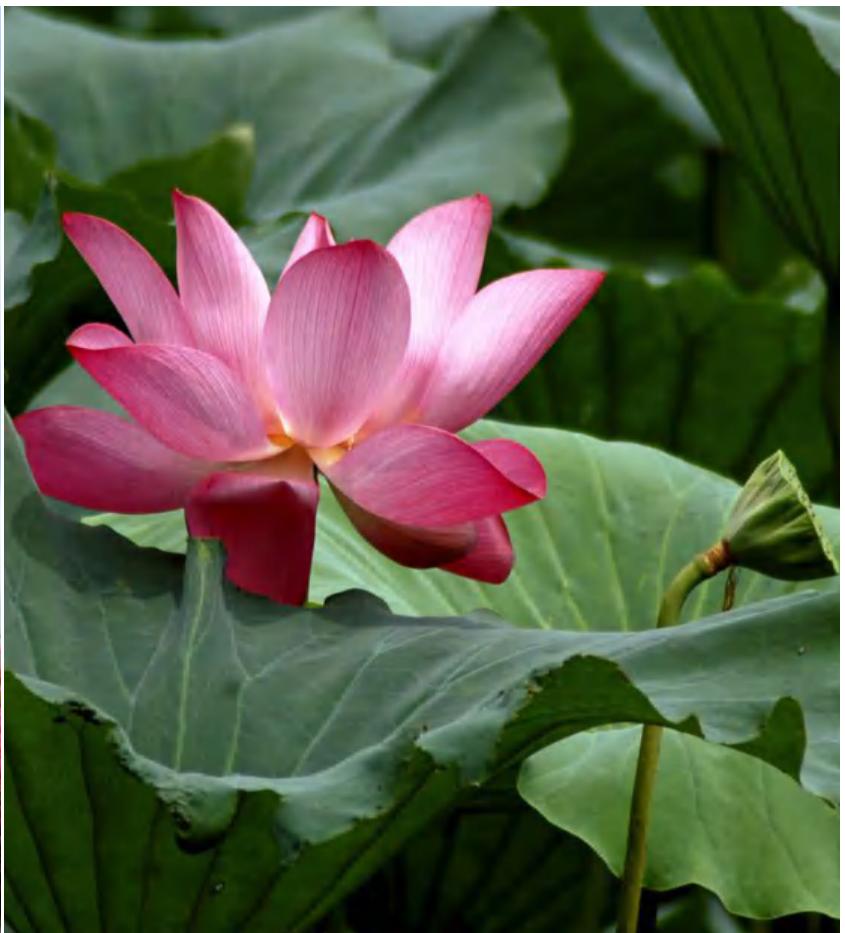
Since I left Hubei, I've lived in Chengdu, Thailand, Singapore and Japan for many years, but I've never seen people eat raw lotus root. In Hubei, we eat them fresh and raw in the winter because it's crunchy and sweet. We also make use of the lotus leaves; it is placed under a bun before we steam it, so it will absorb the



Jack/Flickr

06

A THOUSAND EMERALD LAKES



07

fragrance and produce a light green tint on the bottom.

There is also a unique dish that is only available in our area (not even in other cities of Hubei) and it's the steamed fish cake. We only make it for Chinese New Year and big celebrations like weddings and baby showers. My father used to mix diced fish with lard and steamed the whole thing together. The lard sticks the fish meat together, and after that he pours a layer of egg yolk onto the top, creating a thin yellow skin. The steamed fish cake symbolises the highest respect from the host to the guest.

The social life in our village remains unchanged; the houses are open and

people just walk in to visit each other. Neighbours play a very important role in our daily life. Last winter, my younger brother got married and the wedding was held at home. There were around 300 guests and we didn't hire anyone to receive and serve the guests; our neighbours established a "servant" group and worked for us. It was very well-organised with a leader who is normally the most reputable person in the village. And when other families have celebrations, my parents will also do the same.

There are some popular travel destinations that are not far away from Luzhou, for example, the Three Gorges Dam in Yichang and Jingzhou Ancient

City. And now with the bullet train it's also very convenient to go to the capital city of Wuhan, connected from Shanghai and Chengdu. But if you do visit Hubei, it would be good to spare one day and visit the outer villages, which have a unique way of life. AGP

---

## ELAINE HUANG



Elaine Huang came from Hubei, China and is currently living in Singapore. For the past ten years she has lived in Thailand and Japan, and she is very interested in Asian cultures, customs and traditions. She likes photography, writing, cooking and gardening.

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“*In the summer, the lakes and ponds in our village are full of lotus flowers and their big green leaves*”

07 Hubei is known as China's Province of a Thousand Lakes

# Top 5 places to visit in Hubei

## ① YELLOW CRANE TOWER

As its name suggests, this tower's five roofs resemble the wings of a great crane about to take flight. The current pagoda is a replica of an older tower one kilometre away from its original site, where it had been destroyed and rebuilt seven times throughout its history. What Yellow Crane Tower offers is not just a bird's eye view of Wuhan, but also a beautiful garden surrounding its base.



## ② HUBU ALLEY

If food adventures are right up your alley, this will be your haven. Hubu Alley provides a heavy dose of local culture through unusual street food such as barbecued frogs, pig's blood balls, duck neck and fried snails. A must-try is the hot dry noodles, a staple breakfast for locals.

## ③ THREE GORGES DAM PROJECT

A man-made structure so colossal it is visible from space with the naked eye, the Three Gorges Dam is our planet's largest power station. Regardless of its controversy for harm, it has brought to its surroundings benefits like flood control and clean energy. The dam is also a breathtaking sight to behold.

## ④ WUDANG MOUNTAINS

For those interested in Chinese kungfu, this is one of the places to put on your bucket list. A counterpart to the Shaolin Temple, Wudang Mountains is the birthplace of *tai chi*. The 700-year-old buildings and paths are still intact and well-preserved, making a visit to these mountains a travel back in time.

## ⑤ ENSHI GRAND CANYON

This canyon bears little semblance to its American counterpart of the same name. Its karst landscape carpeted with lush greenery reminds one of the majestic Zhangjiajie that inspired the Avatar's Hallelujah Mountains. Apart from stairs, there are cable cars and escalators to assist climbers, making hikes up the towering spires manageable for people of all ages.



# Top 5 products in Hubei

## ① TEA

Over 300 years ago, Wuhan was the heart of China's tea trade. Loaded with compressed bricks of tea, camel caravans would plod north on long journeys to Russian cities like Moscow. With an ideal climate for tea storage, this remains one of Hubei's top exports.



## ② WUCHANG FISH

Dwelling in silty depths of the Yangtze, this fish is a type of bream popular in Hubei cuisine. Most commonly steamed or braised, it has gained fans from all backgrounds from the city dweller in Wuhan to even Mao Zedong himself. In one of his poems, Mao wrote about savouring a delectable meal of Wuchang fish.



## ③ JADE

Valued at prices even higher than gold, the importance of jade is deeply embedded in Chinese culture. Apart from being a status symbol and representation of wisdom, the word's character bears close resemblance to the Chinese character for "king". Jade is often sold in the form of pendants and bracelets.

## ④ FEATHER FANS

Unlike other traditional paper Chinese fans, these ones found in Honghu are made of feathers. The popularity of this hand accessory stems from its use by the legendary Zhuge Liang character in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms epic.

## ⑤ LACQUERWARE

With varnish harvested from the sap of lacquer trees, craftsmen would carefully decorate vessels and other items with intrinsic designs to create beautiful wares. This art has been practiced as early as 1600 BC, and was especially popular in Hubei province because it had an environment where lacquer trees could thrive.

# JIANGHUA MANDARIN

## THE ORIGINS OF PUTONGHUA



We know Chinese as the most widely spoken language on the planet, but in actuality this macro language can be split into many regional sub-groups. In Hubei, Southwestern Mandarin, Jianghuai Mandarin and the Gan languages are most commonly used. Of these, Southwestern Mandarin dialects are the most common – such as the Wuhan and Shishou dialects. But the tongue which left the greatest mark in history is probably Jianghuai Mandarin, which influenced the official language of China today.

Also known as Lower Yangtze Mandarin, Jianghuai Mandarin is part of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages and is spoken in parts of Hubei, Anhui and Jiangsu, all north of the river. This group of Mandarin dialects is distinguished from its counterparts by the retention of features in Middle Chinese that have now been dropped in modern Putonghua (Standard Chinese). For example, while Putonghua has four tones, many Jianghuai dialects have five tones.

While this characteristic may make the language seem rather archaic, Jianghuai has had more than once paved paths for the future. Peking Opera had its beginnings in parts of Hubei and Anhui where Jianghuai was spoken. Going even further back into the past, it seems that Ming Dynasty

Mandarin – used between 1368 and 1644 – was based largely on the Jianghuai dialect as well.

The importance of Jianghuai even extends to it being the standard of Baihua, which was the written form of Chinese used by the common people (as opposed to Guanhua, the official language used in formal settings). This was the language used for novels throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, before Baihua was replaced by the Beijing dialect in late Qing. Even so, Jianghuai could be said to have retained at least a smattering of relevance, for it influenced the Beijing dialect as well.

Today, the Beijing dialect has gradually morphed into Putonghua, which is not just the official language of China but also Taiwan, and one of the four official languages of Singapore. In its own form, Jianghuai has also been experiencing a revival in Jiangsu, overtaking the once-dominant Wu language.

Sources: *Journal of Asian Pacific communication*, Volume 16, Issues 1-2, *Peking Mandarin*; *Ming studies*, Issue 56.

## PUBLIC HOLIDAYS IN HUBEI 2016

FEB  
8

### MONDAY Chinese New Year

Also known as the Spring Festival, the date of this holiday is determined by the Chinese lunar calendar. It is usually a busy period as families go around visiting their relatives

APR  
4

### MONDAY Qing Ming Festival

On this opportunity to remember and honour their ancestors, families visit burial sites to clean tombs and pay respects

JUN  
9

### THURSDAY Dragon Boat Festival

This day commemorates the death of Qu Yuan, an ancient Chinese poet and minister. People gather to participate in dragon boat races and eat sticky rice dumplings

SEP  
15

### THURSDAY Mid-Autumn Festival

On the 15th day of the eighth lunar month, offerings are made to the Moon Goddess, Chang'e, while mooncakes are shared and eaten among friends and family

OCT  
1

### SATURDAY National Day

During this week-long holiday, families usually spend time together or travel. Public areas are also decorated according to the festivities

SHAN STATE, MYANMAR

# ACROSS THE GOKTEIK VIADUCT

—  
*text*  
SHANDY YEE MON

## GETTING TO SHAN STATE

### FLIGHT INFORMATION:

The capital of Shan State, Taunggyi, does not have an airfield. Nearest domestic flights arrive at Heho Airport, where a taxi to Taunggyi takes around 45 minutes. Heho Airport is just over an hour's flight from Yangon, which can be reached via international airlines like Singapore Airlines, Silkair, Jetstar and Myanmar Airways International.

### HOTELS:

Inle Princess Resort

[www.inle-princess.com](http://www.inle-princess.com)

Hupin Hotel Khaung Daing

[www.hupinhotelmyanmar.com](http://www.hupinhotelmyanmar.com)

Golden Island Cottages

[www.gihotelgroup.com](http://www.gihotelgroup.com)

### CURRENCY:

Myanmar Kyat (US\$1 = 1,200 kyat)





The 15-hour train ride from Mandalay to Lashio is one of the most scenic in Asia



02

One of the most exciting train rides in Asia begins from Mandalay to Lashio via the Gokteik Viaduct. The 15-hour train journey crosses from the Mandalay Region into Shan State, the largest state in Myanmar.

Built in 1900 by the Pennsylvania Steel Company and with parts shipped in from the United States of America, the Gokteik Viaduct is quite an engineering masterpiece. Standing at 335 feet high, it is the highest railway track in Myanmar and was considered an engineering feat in its time. The nature and scenery along the track is more than words can describe.

Gokteik has always been a bit of a mystery in my mind from a young age. I still remember when our family lived in Shan State before we migrated to Mandalay. At the time, my dad would bring us to Mandalay during the school holidays and he would tell us stories of the Gokteik Viaduct whenever we passed by, but I never got the chance to get close to it.

Recently a friend told me that the Burmese government had opened the old railway for sightseeing, so I went on my Gokteik adventure, first by car then by train. On our first trip we decided to explore the area by driving from Pyin Oo

“*The Gokteik Viaduct is the highest railway track in Myanmar and considered an engineering feat in its time*”

02 A disused wooden track can be seen as the train crosses the viaduct

03 Locals selling snacks onboard the train as it passes by the villages



Roman Korzh/Flickr

**04** Humble and friendly village kids at Naung Pain

04



Lwin through Nawnkhoi town (remember to eat the authentic Shan Noodle at Nawnkhoi for breakfast). But the second time we decided to take the train itself.

The ticket costs US\$8 for a round trip from Mandalay or Pyin Oo Lwin towards Lashio and vice versa. The train only has one route a day due to its single track, so plan ahead and don't miss the departure time which is at four in the morning from Mandalay. Slowly, it climbs up to Pyin Oo Lwin in a series of zig-zags to reach the mountain top of this City of Flowers. After Pyin Oo Lwin, it snakes through the countryside to the spectacular and breathtaking Gokteik Viaduct.

Along the journey, you don't need to worry about going hungry, for there are people selling drinks, food and fruits when the train passes by the villages. This is the time when you can do some shopping through the train windows. There is a small local tea shop at Gokteik station where we had a cup of hot tea and some snacks.

As the train is about to approach the viaduct, it will slow down, so that's the best time to take in the spectacular view around the bridge. You can alight here to have a feel of what it's like to walk on the viaduct. The feeling was simply amazing – remember to look down to see the disused wooden train track.

Once the train crosses the bridge, you'll get into Goktwin, another spot for photo-taking. We did not go all the way to Lashio – instead we alighted at the next station in Naung Pain and waited for the return train which would not be for another two hours.

Here is a taste of rural Myanmar, the countryside along the tracks with its customs and traditions well-preserved. All around us buffalos, cows, chickens and



Maxim Malkov/Flickr

goats roamed in front of every house. We bought fresh fruits, vegetables and spoke to the villagers who led a very simple life and who were so humble.

After our long and exciting adventure, we headed out of Shan State and into Pyin Oo Lwin, the charming colonial town that is famed for the National Kandawgyi Gardens, its coffee plantations and colonial buildings. Pyin Oo Lwin is also famous for its strawberry wine and plum wine, which are my favourite, and I always buy them for my father whenever I visit.

In the coming years, Myanmar's tourism will be booming, so it's best to discover the country before it's developed and civilised. Nothing remains unchanged forever. [AGP](#)

## SHANDY YEE MON



Shandy is a nature lover and yoga enthusiast who loves travelling and connecting with nature. She is also co-founder of Yoga Sojourn which was established to share and spread knowledge about yoga.

## Top 5 places to visit in Shan State

### ① INDEIN VILLAGE

Renowned for its ancient Buddhist pagodas, this little village built on stilts lies slightly to the west of Inle Lake. Although only accessible by boat through the long and narrow Inn Thein creek, this journey is well worth it as Indein's flavour is distinctively different from the rest of Myanmar's.

### ② FLOATING GARDENS

Apart from fishing, how else could river people make their living? These gardens, which span a quarter of Inle Lake's area, hold an answer. The locals turn clusters of water hyacinth, sea grass and lake debris into floating islands upon which food crops like tomatoes are grown for sale.



### ③ SHWE YAUNGHWE KYAUNG

Easily overshadowed by its neighbouring Shwe Yan Pyay Monastery, this is one of the hidden gems of Shan State. Within a wooden exterior, thousands of alcoves house little Buddha figurines. Colourful decorations also adorn the temple's walls.

### ④ PINDAYA CAVES

These caves sit on a limestone ridge, and are as much a tourist attraction as they are an important Buddhist pilgrimage site. The southernmost cave is famous for having over 8,000 statues and images of Buddha, where the oldest artefacts date back to the 18th century. Even now, its collection continues to grow through donations from a steady stream of visiting pilgrims.



### ⑤ KENG TUNG MARKET

Considered by many as one of the most interesting markets in Myanmar, here you can get a rich sensory experience of Burmese culture. You can find locals in ethnic dress selling street snacks, fresh produce, sundry goods and even livestock. The people are also friendly and always ready to strike up a casual conversation.

## Top 5 products in Shan State

### ① WOOD CARVINGS

Wood carving is prevalent throughout Myanmar. With intricate detail, craftsmen like to depict religious mythical figures, humans, animals or flowers in their work. Teak is often used due to its high quality and ready availability. Finished products traditionally embellish places like temples and palaces, but can also be easily picked up in souvenir shops.



### ② BELLS

If you're looking for a souvenir that will endure through the years, these traditional item will surely fit your bill. They are most common in temples, but can really be found almost everywhere. The bells usually depict astrological symbols or historical scenes, while material can vary from brass to ceramic and even terracotta.

### ③ MULBERRY PAPER

Pindaya is well-known for its handmade paper, which uses bark from young branches of the Paper Mulberry tree. Leaves and petals from plants like bougainvillea are added to create beautiful patterns during the paper-making process. You may bring a piece of this unique art home in the form of a hand fan or a notebook.

### ④ SHAN BAGS

Perhaps one of the most recognisable souvenirs you could get is the Shan bag, which is carefully hand-woven with cotton. They come in a wide range of colours and designs, but an element that all Shan bags share – which is also what makes them iconic – is two tassels dangling from their bases.

### ⑤ MARIONETTES

These were once a medium for knowledge to be passed on to the people, addressing topics such as literature and religion. Controlling these puppets demanded high technical skills as each figure consists of nearly 20 wires. Although now a dying art, marionettes can still be enjoyed and bought at tourist attractions.



# SAVING THE SHAN LANGUAGE

## REVIVING A LOST DIALECT IN MYANMAR



While Myanmar's official and most widely spoken language is Burmese, Shan is one of the country's seven recognised regional languages. It is part of the Tai subfamily of languages, along with Thai (Siamese) and Lao. The name "Shan" is also believed to be a Burmese derivative of "Siam". These suggest that Shan shares more similarities with these languages than it does with Burmese, and that is indeed so.

A thousand years ago, the Shan people migrated southwards from China's Yunnan and moved into Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. Most settled in the Shan state, where they continue to constitute its majority today. Of an estimated six million Shan people throughout Southeast Asia, there are roughly 3.2 million who speak the language in Myanmar. Many Shan people are also well-versed in other local dialects as well as Burmese, although few are literate in their own language which has a script derived from the Burmese writing system.

Shan has three mutually intelligible dialects which vary slightly in vocabulary and pronunciation. The Eastern Shan dialect bears greater resemblance to Lao and Northern Thai languages, while the Southern and northern "Chinese Shan" are more influenced by Burmese and the Yunnan-Chinese dialect respectively. Even so, as a whole the language still has more correspondence to Thai – the rising, low, mid and high phonemic tones in both languages are close matches. Some words

in Thai, Lao and Shan are also similar; for example, "dog" is pronounced as *ma* in all three languages. In Burmese, the same animal is known as *khway*.

As are other minority ethnic languages, Shan is now struggling to maintain its presence. Myanmar's education system is dominated by Burmese, and many young children forgo their native languages for foreign languages like Thai and Chinese because of better job opportunities overseas. At a lower priority, the teaching of Shan literature now only takes place after school hours. However, all is not lost. Resources on the language have been compiled by various sites online, and as one site puts it, "we are trying to save as much as we can".

### USEFUL PHRASES

Hello – ***May sung khaa!***  
 How are you? – ***Yu li khaa haa?***  
 I am fine – ***Yu li yu khaa***  
 Thank you very much – ***Yin lii nam nam***  
 No problem – ***Am pen tsang!***  
 Where is the toilet? – ***Hong phai mi tang laue kha?***

Sources: [www.shanculture.blogspot.com](http://www.shanculture.blogspot.com),  
[www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com),  
[www.alif-shinobi.blogspot.com](http://www.alif-shinobi.blogspot.com)

### PUBLIC HOLIDAYS IN SHAN STATE 2016

JAN  
4

#### MONDAY Independence Day

This day marks the anniversary of Myanmar's declaration of independence. It is celebrated with sports activities and fairs in various cities

MAR  
2

#### WEDNESDAY Peasants' Day

During this day, plans to improve Myanmar's peasant sector are discussed and revealed. Peasants account for 70% of the country's workforce; and are the ones bearing most of the brunt during political turmoil

JUL  
19

#### TUESDAY Martyr's Day

Commemorates General Aung San and seven other leaders of Myanmar's pre-interim government, who were assassinated on this day in 1947 by political rivals

NOV  
24

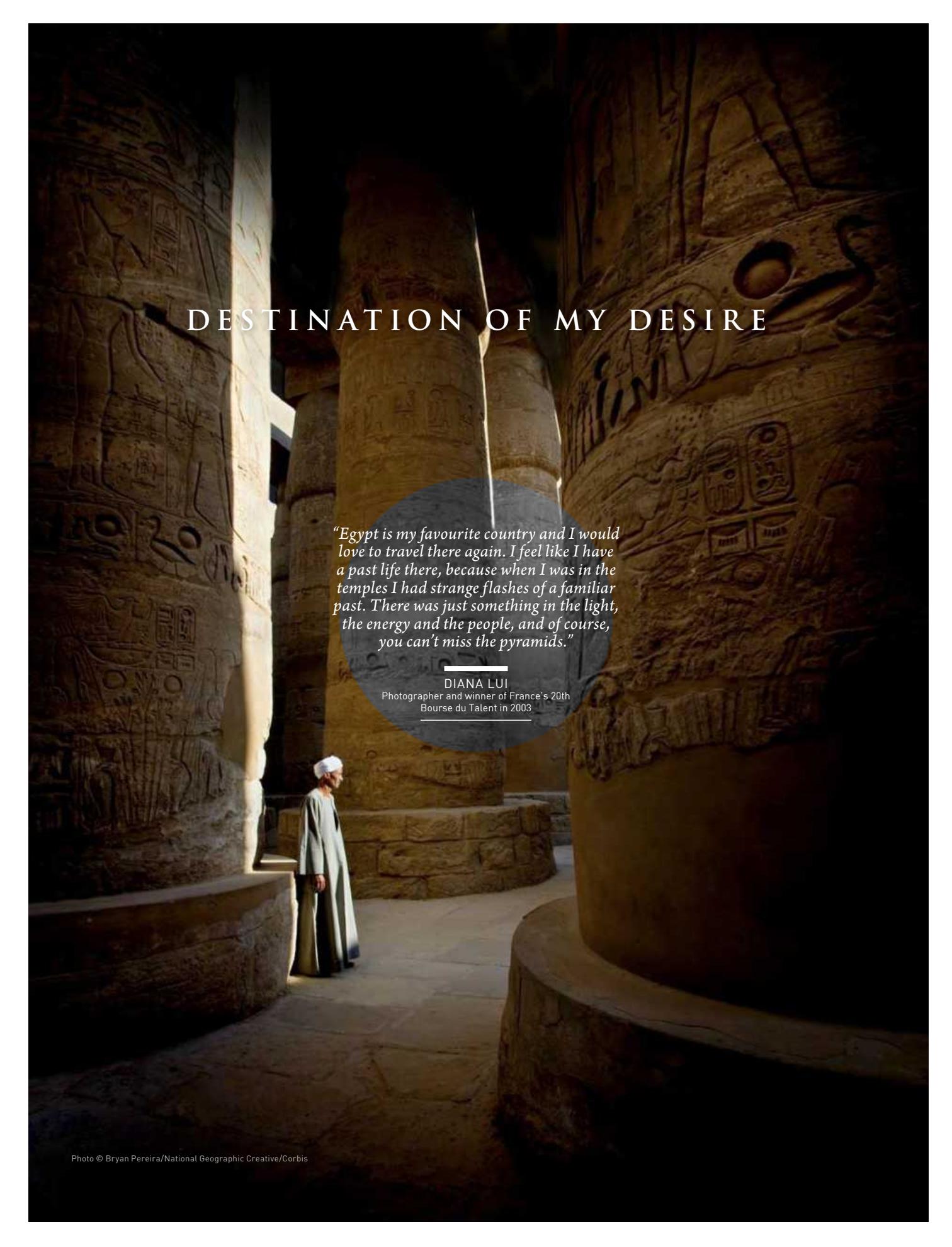
#### THURSDAY National Day

This holiday is based on the Burmese Calendar. It remembers the day when students staged their first revolt against British rule in 1920

DEC  
29

#### THURSDAY Kayin New Year Day

Although it celebrates the heritage of the Kayin, also known as the Karen people, this holiday is celebrated nationwide



## DESTINATION OF MY DESIRE

*"Egypt is my favourite country and I would love to travel there again. I feel like I have a past life there, because when I was in the temples I had strange flashes of a familiar past. There was just something in the light, the energy and the people, and of course, you can't miss the pyramids."*

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DIANA LUI

Photographer and winner of France's 20th  
Bourse du Talent in 2003

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