

# Working with Refugee Women

BY ALICE LEE

*L'auteure explore ici les représentations des réfugiées chinoises au Canada et nous fait part de sa théorie à partir de ses expériences*

My family and I immigrated to Canada over 25 years ago, searching together for a better life. Though we came with hopes for new and better opportunities, our successes came with a price—years of struggle and isolation. We landed on the prairies and were confronted with a society very different than the one we had left. My parents laboured to raise seven children, each grappling with explicit daily outbursts of racism and violence, language acquisition, and the effort to find a place in a new culture. I grew up treated as an alien—an Asian female who doesn't quite belong here and the people who surrounded me made certain I knew it.

Through the years I have fought to understand my heritage and the inherent contradictions in my attempts to bridge the western and eastern cultures. Although the East and West embody vastly different philosophies, I came to recognize that my role as female remains the same. I began to understand that not only do I have to deal with the fact that, no matter how long I have lived here, no matter what I do, I remain an alien in this country, and a woman at that. I share this disadvantage with women across the world.

My introduction to feminism provided me with a comprehensive analysis that enabled me to grapple with these issues, explicitly identifying racism, gender inequality, and the expression of power relations. Frontline experience became more

---

**It has become common to hear age-old statements like “they should go back where they came from,” and “they should come here on legal terms and not be allowed to jump queue.”**

---

and more valuable, instructing me in how to aid all women through anti-violence work. Activism within Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter, a women's organizing centre and transition house, has given me the privilege of meeting a diversity of women and sharing discussions regarding experiences of racism, sexism, poverty, and the condition of our lives. These experiences direct and inform the way that I have come to understand the world and, in particular, the plight of refugee women.

Just over a year ago, the media was flooded with endless stories of Chinese migrants entering Canadian waters on decrepit boats. Since that time, coverage of the event has been uniformly restricted and negative, making it impossible for an average person to determine the true circumstances of these refugees and why they would choose such a dangerous journey.

The messages expressed by local and national media embody predict-

able judgements regarding refugees and the conditions of their lives. Depicted as illegal, costly to the taxpayer, and as threats to our immigration system, Chinese refugees have been incarcerated by the Canadian government—women imprisoned, children apprehended into foster care, and men placed in detention camps—for over a year. Arguing that prison is necessary to ensure the refugee's safety, the government neatly overstepped these refugees' human rights, bypassing just procedure and speeding deportation. Providing inadequate translation services,<sup>1</sup> insufficient and overworked representation, and punitive tactics including isolation lockdowns<sup>2</sup> the Canadian government ensured that most, if not all, claimants would lose their bid for refugee status. The government's actions towards these refugees is unacceptable and has contributed directly to racist rationalizations in the larger community. It is apparent in the systemic way that political issues (i.e., the “squandering” of tax-payers' money) have been linked to successfully augment racist notions, ensuring that the public will develop negative views. It has become common to hear age-old statements like “they should go back where they came from,” and “they should come here on legal terms and not be allowed to jump queue,” as if our immigration system is fair and/or accessible to all people.

An orchestrated public response has been created to isolate the refugees and obscure the true costs of capitalism and its natural brother, patriarchy. It is difficult for the Chinese community in Canada to attach themselves to refugees when all mes-

sages include the costs of doing so. As a culture that has historically struggled to acquire and maintain space in Canada, the community is well versed in the effects and backlash of racism. Attaching themselves and leaving other Canadians with "a bad image of the Chinese" is recognized as an imprudent strategic choice.

Within the Canadian Chinese community, the distance to the refugees is enhanced by the classist structure of immigration laws that have opened the borders to those who are wealthy or hold professional standing. Recent Chinese immigrants are of the elite, middle- and upper-classes that share no empathy or insight regarding the refugee's risk in search of a decent life.

In response of our analysis of the international trafficking of women, and the racist response organized by the Canadian government, our collective decided that we must somehow participate in their struggle—these women were brought here due to the universal circumstances and conditions of our lives. At a recent Legal Education Action Fund (LEAF) conference, women's groups organized a call for the immediate release of the Chinese refugees. Challenging the argument that the government was only shielding refugees from dangerous traffickers or from having no place to go, women's groups quickly responded by arguing that they have a place in our community and by offering to shelter women and children upon their release.

Since that early call, our shelter has worked closely with Direct Action against Refugee Exploitation (DARE) to organize the release and housing of the refugee women. I have met each of the women who have stayed in our shelter and discussed the conditions of their lives so that we can make certain that their voices and stories will be told and added to the stories of all women who have stayed in our shelter. They similar stories. They are tired of expected servitude to their husbands, partners, and the men around them,

frustrated in low-paying jobs, and they resent the lack of control over their own bodies, their lack of sexual autonomy, and the paucity of freedom and control over their own lives. The women stated that wife beating in their country is still viewed as a family problem with no repercussions from the judicial system and

---

**The women stated  
that wife beating  
in their country  
is still viewed  
as a family  
problem with no  
repercussions from  
the judicial system  
and that divorce  
is still inaccessible  
to most women.**

---

that divorce is still inaccessible to most women, particularly those in rural areas.

The women recounted how the enforcement of the "one-child" policy in China has forced many women into involuntary sterilization or compelled them to have "illegal" births in secrecy. The birth of children born outside the law is not registered. Hidden from the government, without identification, these children face a life without healthcare, access to housing, the possibility of migration, and with great obstacles to obtaining an education or work. As the result of a social push to raise male children, female children are overwhelmingly hidden, left to bear the forced to live their lives with no protection from the state.

The women each told us of the costs of the "new" economy, of how they are expected to fully participate in the workforce without child care. For these women, the only work available were slave-labour jobs on

farms and in the factories and sweatshops created by first world corporations who capitalized on their poverty.

We recognize that these women have taken a huge risk in the hopes of bettering their lives. They are easy prey for traffickers who exploit women. First world notions of a "better life" are an easy sale to those who have few alternatives. For many, there are few alternatives. Our government has colluded with these traffickers by applying tremendous pressure along with other first world nations to demand that third world countries conform to the western market ideologies hidden in calls for freedom and democracy. As one woman said, "Canada is known as a country of prosperity and human rights." Promotion of first world standards of living and consumption directly contradicts the material limitations of third world countries. Another woman said "My life and my family's life is very bad. I decided to come to better myself so that I can aid my family."

A barrier remains between Canadian women and the Chinese refugee women that we have been in contact with. When we broached the topic of links between trafficking and prostitution, women were unwilling to acknowledge the possibility that they may be forced to work the streets or in massage parlors. This response is not surprising given their unjust treatment from the government and larger Canadian society. Further, the government treatment ensured that these women would be suspicious of organizing with other women.

We call women to fight their own racism by recognizing the ways that the state is actively promoting racism. We challenge the racist status quo by making certain that we extend the practice and benefits of feminist analysis, historically benefiting primarily white Canadian women, to the Chinese refugees, Aboriginal women, and women of colour. If we cannot demand compassion for these

new women, then how can we expect any changes in our lives that will address the inequality of women in Canada.

The stories these women tell directs and confirms our analysis of their decisions and subsequent treatment. It is clear that women's groups should recognize these events as feminist issues and that our intervention can help. Women's groups should continue to shelter and advocate for changes to our unjust immigration policies and recognition of refugee status. Let us utilize the World March of Women 2000 to fight and call for international accountability to women.

*Alice Lee is the daughter of a Chinese doctor, mother, herbalist and an acupuncturist father who grew up in the Prairies and has worked in the a transition house and rape crisis centre for some six years now. She practices martial arts and returns to china whenever she can to her teacher and to a country she loves.*

<sup>1</sup>In the prisons, women were confronted by language barriers created by a lack of accessibility to translation services and advocacy groups interested in working on their behalf. Day-to-day interactions with prison staff were made difficult as women chose not to respond to orders that they did not understand.

<sup>1</sup>One woman recounted how her expressions of emotional distress (i.e., crying) resulted in a 28-day lockdown, isolated from the other refugees.

## ANNE BLONSTEIN

### ophelia in rotem kleid\*

colour after death? can memory dance  
in shot silk? or must our voices echo in the rafters

of skulls

in smoked romances? you cannot cover  
your fear with no choices. superficial  
and too deep. dew and rust kiss the surfaces  
of a rose petal. the violet tenderness  
when you sleep in a silent bed. where  
do the crows fly to at midnight? your dreams?  
self parables against the grave. fragments  
of fear the ellipse. two bodies. two foci. far apart  
but touching. at edges. the slow path  
of a word chandelier. i stitched this dress  
with my blood. with pearls from my ovaries.

\*ophelia in a red dress

*Anne Blonstein was born in England. She currently lives and works in Switzerland. Her poetry has been published in journals and anthologies around the world.*

## EMILY HUNTER

### breakfast musings

i am standing adrift in your kitchen,  
amidst the shifting light of morning.  
leaning over the table you kiss me,  
pulling me back under as the scent of earth and sea  
spills onto my open lips.  
it is the burst of creation,  
of light and darkness,  
the contradictions of fate and chance  
which have brought me here, to you.  
i have inhaled the acrid sweet trail of cologne  
splashed across your neck,  
but i prefer the musky smell of sweat  
found hidden in your dark hollows.  
you offer me coffee,  
tempting me with its full aroma  
but i smell only the crash of salt,  
breaking against our bodies in the darkness.

*emily hunter is a Toronto-based poet and writer. She is currently working with a friend on a collaborative book of poetry and art.*