

STORIES OF CHANGE

# Freedom song



The Vanguard Series

**The Vanguard Series:** Paving innovative ways to combat trafficking and unsafe migration

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ISBN 978-0-918261-54-0

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Developed and published by the Mekong Delta Regional Trafficking Strategy (MDRTS) Project and the End Trafficking in Persons (ETIP) Programme on behalf of World Vision International

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Managed on behalf of the MDRTS Project and ETIP Programme by John Whan Yoon and Amy Collins. Senior Editor: Heather Elliott. Production Management: Katie Klopman Fike. Copyediting: Melody Ip. Cover Design and Interior Layout: Inis Communication. Illustrations: Natasha Bautista and Rishi Mandhyan.

Designed and printed by Inis Communication – [www.iniscommunication.com](http://www.iniscommunication.com)

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Lily sang like she had never sung before. It was a dazzling performance, building to a powerful finale. When she finished, the crowd was on their feet, cheering wildly and taking photos with their phones. Here she was – Myanmar's new singing sensation and still only 16 years old! Lily smiled and blew kisses to her adoring fans.







Suddenly, Lily awoke with a bump. She was on a bus. The concert, the adoring fans ... it had all been a dream.

She looked around and remembered where she was. She was travelling through China on a noisy, uncomfortable bus and, seated beside her, was a woman named Sanda. The events of the last few days came flooding back. She still couldn't believe how fast it had all happened.







A few days earlier, Lily had been hanging out with her friends near the market. As so often happened, they asked her to sing, and a small crowd gathered. When she finished, there was polite applause before everyone continued with their lives. Lily was about to leave when she noticed Sanda staring at her.


‘With a voice like that and your good looks, you could make a fortune singing in China,’ Sanda said.

Lily wasn’t sure whether or not to take her seriously, but Sanda explained that she was a talent agent. ‘This is what I do,’ she told Lily. ‘I look for people with special gifts and I turn them into stars. You can stay here or you can follow your dreams. It’s your choice.’

Lily’s friends looked at her with wide-eyed amazement. She had a big decision to make.







The next day, Sanda met with Lily's parents and persuaded them that Lily could have a big future if she managed it correctly. Sanda spread glossy business cards and brochures on the kitchen table. They did look impressive even though most of the text was in Chinese, which neither Lily nor her parents could read.

Lily's parents could see how excited Lily was. They knew how long she had been dreaming of this moment. How could they stand in her way now?

When her dad smiled and nodded, Lily let out a squeal of excitement. 'Thank you!' she cried. 'I won't let you down!'



Lily and Sanda left for China a few days later and had been sitting on the bus ever since. Lily couldn't believe how huge China was! They had been travelling solidly for two days and, according to Sanda, they still had a long way to go.

'It's far from home,' thought Lily. 'But it's going to be worth it!'

Along the way, Lily asked Sanda many questions, but she noticed that Sanda had become a lot less chatty. On their last day on the bus, Sanda's only reply to Lily was, 'Yes, my dear, your life is about to change forever.'

Lily could hardly sit still. She was so excited!








Eventually, the bus rolled into a big, bustling city. A man named Huang, who Lily presumed was going to be her manager, met them at the bus terminal.

Lily was confused when she saw Huang paying Sanda money. Then Sanda walked off without saying goodbye to Lily. When Lily tried to find out what was going on, Huang merely shrugged.

They went to a house where everything became even more puzzling. There were other people living there, but Lily spoke little Chinese and struggled to communicate with them. All of her questions were met with confused expressions.







The next day, someone who spoke Burmese arrived at the home. Lily could barely believe the words she was hearing. 'Huang is going to be your husband,' the person said with a smile.

Lily had heard stories about girls becoming victims of trafficking for forced marriage. She had always wondered how anyone could be so foolish or naïve to let such a thing happen. Never in a million years did she think it could happen to her.

These were dark days for Lily. All of her dreams came crashing down and now she was expected to act like a wife to this complete stranger. All Lily wanted was to be at home but, as she lay there, alone in the darkness, she made a promise to herself. 'I will not accept this,' she vowed. 'I will do everything in my power to get my life back again.'

In the months that followed, Lily was married to Huang and forced to take on the role of his wife. On the outside, she played the part of the accepting wife. But inside, she was more determined than ever to escape the situation.

An opportunity arose one day when Huang mistakenly left his mobile phone at home. Lily immediately tried to call her family but was unable to get through to Myanmar. The only other contact she had in China was her uncle, Mi. She tried his number and, to her great relief, Mi answered.

Mi, who Lily remembered as a kind schoolteacher, was completely shocked when he heard Lily's story. But Lily hadn't been talking long when she heard her husband returning home. She quickly hung up and went back to her cleaning. She hadn't even been able to tell Mi her location in China.







The phone call from Lily was enough to turn Mi's world upside down. He desperately wanted to do something but he didn't know what. He didn't even know where Lily was! Pacing up and down in his living room, he racked his brain. Who could he ask for advice?

Then he remembered Ju, a staff member at World Vision, who had recently visited his school to conduct a 'Love and Be Loved' programme, which provided opportunities for students to care for the lonely and disabled.

He called Ju and was sitting in her office an hour later. Ju listened carefully to everything Mi had to say and then asked to see his phone. She looked at the number Lily had called from and determined that the call came from Chizhou City in Anhui Province. She then contacted the World Vision office in Chizhou City and asked them to give the phone number to the police.







The police in Chizhou City traced the phone number to Huang's house. The next day, they raided the house and rescued Lily. Getting her home was no easy feat as she was so far from Myanmar. But Mi helped by sending money, so Lily got a police escort all the way to the Myanmar border.

When Lily climbed out of the police car at the border, the first people she saw were her parents. She rushed into their arms. It was a moment none of them would ever forget.

Before going back to China, the police told Lily and her parents that Huang had paid 110,000 RMB (more than US\$17,000) for Lily, most of it borrowed from family and friends. The policeman also wanted to assure Lily and her family that Huang would be brought to justice for what he had done, and that they were searching for Sanda.



Back in her hometown, Lily now works and sings at a small local restaurant. Her friends and family are always around, which is something she loves and never takes for granted. She has written several songs about her experience in China. Her hope is that anyone listening to her songs will become more aware of the dangers out there.

If you visit that small restaurant in Myanmar, it's likely you'll hear someone shout, 'Hey Lily! How about the Freedom Song?' Then a young woman with a guitar will step up onto the small stage and the restaurant will go quiet.

*Freedom is like sunshine on a cold winter's day,  
You never spare a thought for it until it goes away.  
They are taking people's freedom and throwing  
away the key, It can happen to any one of us –  
never say 'it won't be me'.*









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