



[Issue Eight](#)

Globalisation

The Image-World

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Walls of glass protect the shining surfaces of commodities on the main street in Kunming. Lit from above and wiped clean of the sweat of labour, the metallic skins of designer watches, digital video cameras and the soft curves of perfume bottles are suggestively posed on velvet cloth or propped up on display stands for maximum exposure. The English labels and posters of blonde European women add further layers of fantasy to the objects. It all seems so far away. His eyes are drawn to the sparkling surfaces and he takes a step closer until his nose touches the glass. He doesn't notice the security camera hidden in the glare of the overhead lights. It all seems so close. Then the security guard steps from beside the door and with a firm hand on his shoulder directs him away from the glass wall. As he looks back over his shoulder he sees the security guard wiping the glass with a cloth where his nose left a tiny round mark.

He works in a cigarette factory in Kunming owned by an American company. Although he'd like to, he can't afford to buy the cigarettes he makes. He'll never "enjoy the taste of freedom" the American cigarettes give you. He knows all about America. He's seen it on television and at the movies. It's the land of the free. In America, everything is free. Cigarettes are free, watches are free, cars are free. Well they're not exactly free but everyone has lots of money which is the same thing. He's started to learn English because he wants to go to America and study law at Harvard Law School (he saw it on a movie). Then he'll come back and buy everything in the windows. Then he'll be able to "enjoy the taste of freedom." You try to explain about another America – the homeless people begging on the streets of Los Angeles, the recent migrants working in inner-city sweatshops who'll never get above the poverty line, the paranoid gun culture and the pollution and the ... But it's no use. He's seen America on the television and in the shop windows on the main street. He knows you're wrong.

You'd heard that globalisation is about collapsing boundaries but now wonder if the collapse of some boundaries means the production of new ones. It seems that the new technologies that produce and maintain the image-world we increasingly inhabit actually increase distance at the same time as they collapse distance. You reflect on the distance between you. He works in a factory making cigarettes so someone like you in distant land can live in the midst of the image-world. Your job in the culture industry has become routine – adding value to goods produced in distant countries has now become a kind of cheap magic trick. You were bored of your new mobile phone, your digital video camera and your designer underwear and so you got on an airplane in search of something you thought you'd lost. The main street of Kunming with its concrete footpath and glass shop windows filled with the latest Western commodities is not what you're searching for.

Behind the glass and concrete of the main street of Kunming, a series of alleyways curl out of sight. You follow one of these cobbled alleys, past red-brick houses, around several bends until you arrive at the open-air market. People crowd the narrow lane of open shops and temporary stalls, the sound of bargaining and sellers shouting their prices fills the air. Woven bamboo baskets of brown onions fresh from the ground, rows of lettuce, cabbages, bok choy and spinach spill over the table. Behind them are stacks of sacks filled with dried chillis, dried shrimps, dried fungi and a myriad of other dried food. Then a series of earthenware pots filled with preserved vegetables in luminous reds and yellows. A woman scoops rice from a large sack into a paper bag. Beside the neat piles of red apples, a child holds a bunch of herbs for his mother as she weaves silk for padded jackets. Mounds of tomatoes and green peppers fill the table next to fresh wet noodles, white and glutenous on bamboo platters; cooking oil in large drums beside tanks of flipping fish. The smell of pancakes and fried onions stops you for a moment and you catch a glimpse of the pea-sheller's fingers working quickly despite the cold. A man is weighing tofu slices with lead weights, prefried or cut to order in soft blocks. Children stop and watch a man feeding noodle sheets into a cutting machine. In the heart of the market, on wooden chopping blocks stained with blood are a collection of animal parts – hearts, livers, a row of ribs, thick shoulders and strips of fat, the pink marbled slices of cut rumps, a chicken partly plucked and splayed open ready for stuffing. Everything's so close. You take a step back.

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