It is my first day conducting interviews, and I have just left the pre-screening room, where patients are tested to see whether they are fit for surgery. I enter the pre-op ward down the hall, where those that have tested positively wait to be called for surgery. It is a large, military style ward, around 20 beds, folded linens laid on each, and simple side cabinets in between. Most of the beds have people sitting on them. They are joined by families, bringing food. You can tell who the patients are, as they are marked with cross above their eye, indicating which side the cataract is on.

From the far side of the ward, I hear a voice. It’s loud, agitated - I do not understand what is being said. It is coming from a younger woman. She is asking many questions to the other patients around her. I ask my interpreter to tell me what the problem is. She tells me very simply - This woman is blind. She doesn’t quite understand where she is. I ask to sit next to her and tell her I can help explain further - that she is in a pre-op ward and that she has been given the go ahead for the operation from the room she was in earlier. The operation will happen later today but we can’t quite specify when yet as each operation may fluctuate in timing, depending on how bad the cataract is. She is reassured. I am still curious about how she obtained her blindness. Most patients only had a single cataract forming in one eye. I wanted to know more about what conditions had caused both eyes to suffer.
Her name is Chin Htwe Lin. She is 65 years old and has recently retired from her job as a seamstress. Her cataracts have been getting worse for the last 3 years. She had survived with troubled eye-sight for 2 years until she began to realize that it was affecting the quality of her work. Her brother has come to Hsipaw to get his cataract removed last year, which is how she heard about the missions here in Hsipaw. She came to get her cataract removed during the last mission 3 months ago. However, during her pre-screening, she was told that her Diabetes was too severe, meaning that she would be unable to have surgery.

For the last few months, she has been consulting a physician and dietician, who has been helping her to get to a place where her blood sugars are stable enough, through diet and moderate exercise (she is unable to exercise rigorously, due to her sight). Today is her lucky day. This hard work is about to pay off.

Two days later, I ran into Chin Htwe Lin outside of the post op ward, having lunch with her family. She stands immediately and walks towards me. She raises her arms to my face, letting my chin rest in her palms. She looks intensely at me... And smiles. Her grips releases and grabs my hand, offering me to sit with her. My translator and I take her up on her offer. We sit and chat. Her demeanor has completely changed. Her once wandering gaze is now a focused and laser like - almost intimidating. During our conversation, she will sometimes raise her hand and place her fingers calculatedly on one of our faces - not on any large feature, like a nose or chin, but more on places that I had previously thought were meaningless - where the eyebrow reaches its crescent, before receding south again and how the hair’s texture there creates the shape of the brow. Her mood is definitely more optimistic. She no longer wishes to return to work. She feels her sight has provided new opportunities. She does not quite yet know what she wants to do, but is excited with the prospect of choice. So are we.