

SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS

in the Mill City: Changing Families, Communities and Institutions -
Thirty Years Afterwards.

Tuyet-Lan Pho, Jeffrey N. Gerson and Sylvia R. Cowan, eds.
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Research and publication on refugee experiences and contexts has long been dominated by a handful of key approaches. One prominent school of refugee studies has focused on the legal arena, comprised of the international laws, covenants and treaties that aim to protect refugee rights and otherwise shape the global refugee determination regime. Another area of scholarship has focused on the conditions of and motivations for departure—the civil wars, ethnic conflicts, natural disasters and environmental changes, economic hardships, long-term oppressions, and developmental projects that have forced specific populations and communities to migrate. Much less has been written regarding the resettlement experiences of refugees within new countries and host communities. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the images of refugees that dominate public perception and discourse are often ones of poverty, trauma, victimization and despair. Yet the story of refugee adaptation and acculturation in new homes and new lands is an important one that is slowly emerging from a diverse range of contexts and locations, speaking to the experience of North Africans in Southern Europe, Afghans in Pakistan, Palestinians in Lebanon and Egypt, Somalis in Canada, or Bosnians in the United States, to take but a few examples. The analysis of such cases joins with an extant – if still limited – body of literature that has explored the experiences of older waves of refugees, especially following the Second World War. Together these accounts paint a picture of resilient and vibrant communities that survive and indeed thrive despite struggling against a steep learning curve coupled with systemic constraints, social exclusion, xenophobia, and often racism. Stories of immigrant settlement are crucial to recount and analyze, therefore, as a way of redefining refugee communities as active participants in reshaping our increasingly globalized world.

In the United States publications on such experiences are especially scarce, other than those that discuss the earlier waves of refugee arrivals. In part this has to do with the newness of the most recent arrivals. Refugees from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have been in the United States for less than ten years on average, while those coming from Africa have only arrived in significant numbers in the last five or six years. One group that has established itself in North America (and especially the United States) over a longer duration are those groups that fled Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the late 1970s. A diverse group of refugees—including former allies of the United States in its conflicts in the region, those escap-

ing the Khmer Rouge's genocidal reign, and families driven abroad by regional wars and ethnic strife—several of these Southeast Asian groups settled in the United States; most in California, but with significant populations in Texas, Minnesota, Florida, Washington, Louisiana, and Virginia. Because they have been in the US in some cases for over thirty years, several studies have been published in recent years that have been able to conduct more of a longitudinal assessment of the resettlement experience of Southeast Asian refugees.

Southeast Asian Refugees and Immigrants in the Mill City: Changing Families, Communities and Institutions—Thirty Years Afterwards is a particularly fine contribution to this emerging literature. It is especially unique in that it focuses on the specific context of the Southeast Asian refugee experience within the Northeastern United States, in the case of the mid-sized New England city of Lowell, Massachusetts. In a wide-ranging collection of essays, contributors from a diverse set of disciplinary backgrounds examine the struggles of the various Southeast Asian groups to adjust to a new life, new beliefs and cultural expectations while maintaining a distinct sense of communal identity. The very strong sense that one gets from the various chapters – on education, language, social networks, secondary migration, civic engagement and public discourse – is that the refugees themselves have struggled hard and succeeded in being narrators of their own lives. The volume does not suggest that the processes are either straightforward or monolithic, however; Jeffrey Gerson's "The Battle for Control of the Trairatanaram Cambodian Temple" highlights internal divisions and struggles for power over political as well as religious identities within a particular part of the community. Sylvia Cowan's "Lao Refugees in Lowell: Reinterpreting the Past, Finding Meaning in the Present" similarly shows the contentious nature of relationships with the homeland, both in memory and in the contemporary moment. Other chapters, such as Leakhena Nou's "Exploring the Psychosocial Adjustment of Khmer Refugees in Massachusetts from an Insider's Perspective" argue that it is not only cultural adjustments with regard to language, education, and economic opportunities that we must pay attention to, but equally the post-traumatic experiences of refugees who are fleeing conflict zones.

The wide range of disciplinary perspectives that the volume draws upon – including anthropology, political science, economics, sociology, education and psychology—means a collection that is uneven at times in its presentation and style. Some of the chapters also read as more works in progress or recommendations for further research than fully-fleshed narratives. Such limitations are not uncommon in collected editions, however, and do not detract from the considerable contribution that this excellent volume makes to the literature on both global as well as US refugee studies. *Southeast Asian Refugees and Immigrants in the Mill City: Changing Families, Communities and Institutions* is therefore highly recommended for scholars and students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels in a range of disciplines as well as for policymakers and community activists concerned with issues of refugee resettlement and social justice.