

IN CAMPS: VIETNAMESE REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REPATRIATES.

BY JANA LIPMAN [University of California Press, 2020, 328 pp. Hardback \$85.00. ISBN: 9780520343665]

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In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Repatriates demonstrates how the survival of the Vietnamese refugees was intricately linked to the geopolitics and local politics of their host countries. The book explains the changing refugees' identity. From refugees, asylum seekers, and eventually repatriates, the Vietnamese refugees' status is contingent. Lipman narrates not only the struggles of the Vietnamese refugees who fled to survive and seek permanent resettlement, but also raises critical questions on asylum and refugee policy at the national and international levels. By incorporating sources from UNHCR archives, local and international newspaper articles, as well as government documents from the United Kingdom, United States, and Hong Kong, Lipman's study underscores the contingencies inherent in refugee policy.

To be sure, *In Camp* is not a comprehensive compilation of Vietnamese refugees. Instead, the book focuses on the refugee camps in Guam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong at different times between 1975 to 2005. The first chapter focuses on the Vietnamese repatriates who demanded to return to Vietnam. Vietnamese refugees in Guam were predominantly men who belong to the military's lowest echelon, and desperately wanted to be repatriated back to Vietnam to reunite with their families. Their desperation to return to Vietnam was exhibited in violent protests, sit-ins, and even hair shaving which tested their host country. But once repatriated to their own country, they were tragically treated as suspicious citizens and were sent to re-education camps. Although the Vietnamese repatriates' defiance was a triumphant rejection of U.S imperialism, the irony of the Vietnamese refugees in Guam is that they become prisoners of war in their own country when they were repatriated.

The following chapter argues how Malaysia's refusal to host more Vietnamese refugees eventually pushed the UNCHR and other resettlement countries in the West to change their refugee policies. Like most of their neighbouring countries, Malaysia displayed animosity toward the Vietnamese refugees by pushing their boats back to international waters and categorizing them as "Vietnamese illegal immigrants". Despite that, Malaysia was also hosting hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees in Bidong island, Terengganu. The UNHCR,

the Malaysian government, and the support of the locals helped these Vietnamese refugees to seek temporary shelter in Bidong Island and eventual resettlement to other countries.

Chapter four and five are dedicated to the story of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. Vietnamese refugees who sought refuge in Hong Kong were eventually resettled in other Western countries like the United Kingdom and the United States of America. But there were also tens of thousands who were stuck in Hong Kong for years. When Hong Kong changed its asylum determination process in 1988, requiring the Vietnamese refugees to prove that they were indeed victims of persecution, it led to allegations of human rights violations. As the threat of forced repatriation become imminent, Vietnamese activists in the camps staged protests and hunger strikes. Legal advocates for the Vietnamese helped file lawsuits before Hong Kong courts. In a significant court ruling in 1996, the High court ordered the release of 200 Vietnamese – a human rights triumphant for this vulnerable group of people.

Chapter six which is also the last chapter of the book focuses on the resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees in Palawan between 1996 to 2005. The national policy in the Philippines is more welcoming to Vietnamese refugees. Yet what is most interesting about this chapter is the efforts of the local Catholic communities in assisting the Vietnamese refugees. Many Vietnamese refugees eventually settled down in the Philippines.

Lipman's ambitious book is a welcome contribution to the field of critical refugee studies. The strength of the book is the detailed examination of what happened in the camps as places of transition as well as a temporary shelter that is filled with hope and despair. Rather than mere helpless people, the Vietnamese refugees were resilient and determined to pressure their host countries to either expedite their resettlement or to change policy so much so that they would resort to protests and hunger strikes. The second key feature of Lipman's book is her analysis of the politics of refugee protection (or the lack of it) from a legal, national and international perspective. Lipman demonstrates how pressure from the national level has an impact at the national level and vice versa. The chapter on Malaysia is a case in point. Another distinctive contribution of Lipman's study is raising the question of who is a refugee. The Vietnamese refugees have been called "boat people", "illegal immigrants", "asylum seeker", and some local terms which are all laden with different connotations. The construction of what constitutes a refugee itself could help alter the locals' perception of this group of people and invariably influence local policies as well. Finally, *In Camps* underscores how refugee camps serve both as a place of humanitarian assistance as well as a prison – a phenomenon that refugees in the

current day continue to wrestle with. It also raises the critical issue that refugees – a category of vulnerable people may sometimes have lesser rights than prisoners.

Perhaps, *In Camp's* only weakness is that while the case studies raise relevant questions, they could not be generalized for the refugee crisis in entire Southeast Asia. Even so, Lipman sets a standard for future scholars to contribute to the field of critical refugee studies.

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