

control of three Cambodian resistance factions.³⁰ There were also about 30,000 refugees, most of them ethnic Chinese, living in Vietnam.

Bosseba Kong, a refugee herself, described the incidents leading to the removal of her upper-class family from Phnom Penh.³¹ She was attending a private school for girls run by Catholic nuns when the 1970 overthrow of Sihanouk occurred. The majority of the students at the school were Vietnamese, and because of the enmity between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese, the school was closed. Kong was not Vietnamese and was able to transfer to a high school in Cambodia. She planned to go to France for a college education. In 1975 the Khmer Rouge began to move forces into Phnom Penh, already overcrowded with refugees. Foreigners and upper-class Cambodians began to leave. Kong's father sent her and the rest of the family to Saigon. Kong arrived there in March 1975, when the South Vietnamese government was disintegrating and the American embassy was evacuating its employees. Her father rejoined the family by taking the last plane out of Phnom Penh, just as the Khmer Rouge took over the city.

But the situation in Saigon became critical, so the family then moved to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Life there was peaceful, but because the future seemed uncertain, Kong's father decided to leave Laos. The entire family "sneaked out" of Laos into Thailand—they had been informed that Cambodian passports would not be recognized. They were able to make it safely to Oudong Air Base and then to Outapao Air Base, where many Cambodian refugees lived. From there it was a wait of several weeks before boarding a plane in June 1975 for El Toro Air Base, then to the Marine Corps Base at Camp Pendleton, and finally to a small town on the outskirts of Los Angeles under the sponsorship of the Presbyterian church.

Early Adaptation

The change from a peaceful, privileged life in Cambodia to eventual arrival in the United States covered almost every life situation that a person could experience. There was danger, anxiety, and fear, interspersed with happy moments and new experiences. The clash between norms, lifestyles, and cultures was constant. No matter where Kong and her family went, it called for adjustment and adaptation. Homesickness was a problem, and even today many refugees feel that their real home is Phnom Penh.

Judy Pasternak described the life of Tea Chamrath, who is also a refugee from Cambodia but holds a different orientation.³² Tea learned English, got a job as a mapmaker, saved money, and brought his family to America. But Tea, a former marine commander in Cambodia, was not a typical immigrant. His plans did not include a future in the United States; his desire was to go back to Cambodia to fight. He read everything that he could about current events in Southeast Asia and joined with other Cambodians

who planned to topple the regime in Phnom Penh. Many of his fellow refugees were former high-ranking military officers under Prince Sihanouk.

Resisters such as Tea, although fiercely militant in their desire to retake their homeland, were generally seen by Americans as doughnut makers, welfare counselors, and owners of small markets and jewelry stores. They seemed ordinary immigrants, just trying to make a living. Tea reportedly left for Southeast Asia, but no word was heard from him after the fall of Phnom Penh to the Vietnamese.

The situation in Cambodia is a case study of frustration and failure. No one seems to have won. The biggest losers have been the peasants. Millions have died or fled; those who remain exist under conditions of extreme hardship.

ADAPTATION

Since the arrival of the refugees is still so relatively recent, it is difficult to provide systematic evidence about their adaptation. We hypothesize seven interrelated factors that will affect the adaptation of the Vietnamese, as well as the other Southeast Asian refugees, to the United States:

1. Goals
2. Cohesion of the ethnic community and family
3. Compatibility of the ethnic culture with host society norms and values
4. Role of the federal government and voluntary agencies
5. Reception by the host society
6. Ethnic identity
7. Occupation and education

Goals

The goals of a group are related to motivations for immigration and subsequent experiences upon arrival in the new country. Refugees, as discussed earlier, are not voluntary immigrants and therefore may regard their stay in a country as temporary, awaiting the day that they can return home. However, the return home is obviously quite different from the quest of the sojourners; refugees must await the reinstatement of a favorable political regime. In many ways they may represent a government in exile, although for most the term may be too formal and unrealistic. The government-in-exile model, an experience that was a part of the early Korean migration, has also seen its counterparts in the Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, and Cuban experiences, as well as that of the White Russian refugees from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. We have talked to members of several of these

communities who have attempted to keep alive the native culture through the celebration of historic events and rituals. Some have even formed cabinets and appointed ministers and carry on as if they were part of a government. The strongest incentive to retain their old ways is the hope that one day they will be able to return to their homeland in triumph.

The initial policy of the U.S. government was to settle the refugees in widely scattered sites so that they would assimilate rapidly. This policy also sought to avoid intense competition for jobs in specific localities, which would arouse a backlash by American workers. There was also pressure to resettle the refugees as rapidly as possible, however unsuitable the situation, in order to place them in the category of "voluntary migrants" who would be able to take care of themselves and become "American."³³ Policymakers ignored the possible social and psychological consequences of separation, although there is little question that scattered individuals will integrate and assimilate at a higher rate than those residing in ethnic enclaves. The separation policy generally did not work; after a few months, many refugees moved away from their sponsors to live in California, Texas, and Louisiana. Their concentration in urban areas has provided the social networks that have been characteristic of the development of other Asian groups.

Beth Baldwin reported on two surveys conducted of the Indochinese in Orange County in California in 1981 and 1984. The 1984 report indicated that the longing to return to their native countries had not decreased and that a lesser percentage had applied for citizenship in 1984 than in 1981. There was a higher tendency to identify themselves in ethnic terms, such as Vietnamese, Lao, or Cambodian, rather than American. Baldwin speculated that the changes may be due to a difference in stages, whereby concerns for survival, which were of high priority at the beginning, were superseded by questions of past heritage.³⁴

For many old-timers, the desire to return to the homeland will remain paramount, and acculturation and integration may be unrealistic goals. However, the younger refugees are acculturating more rapidly, are more desirous of becoming American citizens, and are more optimistic about their future in the United States.³⁵

It is likely that refugees who have done well economically, educationally, and socially will be more likely to set goals of integration and assimilation. Younger refugees will also acculturate and become "American" at a rapid pace, and they will question the norms and values of their parents, just as children of other immigrants have done. It may be difficult for parents to teach their children "Vietnamese ways" and even more difficult to socialize them for a return to the old country as time in America lengthens.

It should be noted that one can be a "success" without acculturating, integrating, and assimilating. An individual can retain an ethnic identity,

practice the ethnic culture, and participate primarily with fellow ethnics and still be a good American citizen or resident alien.

Cohesion of Ethnic Community and Family

The initial attempt by the federal establishment to separate and scatter the refugees throughout the country may have been based on good intentions, but it failed to take into consideration the valuable roles played by ethnic communities and families. Initially, there were no established Southeast Asian communities, but since 1975 over 500 mutual assistance associations have been created within the refugee communities.³⁶ They encompass cultural, religious, and political groups. Other organizations fulfill professional needs and serve senior citizen and youth groups. They provide social, religious, and fraternal support; education and language development; job training; and cultural orientation. As resources are meager, they have not developed to the point of providing jobs and business opportunities on a large scale to fellow refugees. Yet there are signs of the development of such economic assistance. For example, the area in Orange County, California, known as Little Saigon is made up of Vietnamese noodle shops, grocery stores carrying Asian foodstuffs, boutiques, Chinese herbal medicine shops, and a variety of professional offices.³⁷ Little Saigon provides a place where the refugees can speak the same language and experience the ambience of their home country. Another community has grown up in Anaheim, where there are shops and a club with the ambience of Saigon, including Vietnamese music and familiar food.³⁸

Perhaps the most important function of an ethnic community is to provide social and psychological support for a population that has been forced to adapt to a strange land with different customs. It is a familiar story; most immigrants have gone through this stage. At one time the development of such communities was frowned on. The ethnic ghetto was considered a hindrance to Americanization and the "melting pot," but recent trends have been toward the encouragement of ethnic diversity and pluralistic structures. However, these ethnic communities are not all peaceful enclaves; there are intragroup conflicts based on political ideology, competing ambitions for leadership, status distinctions, and the question of who can serve as spokespersons for the group.

Refugees who arrived in family units—extended family included—had a number of practical advantages, such as emotional support and multiple incomes. They came from a culture, similar to other Asian groups we have discussed, with hierarchical family structures with the male at the head. A constant problem with such structures is that the role of the male head may be threatened. If the man who used to be the head of the family can't find a job or obtains one inferior to his employment in Vietnam, his

role and status are threatened. In addition, the wife may be forced to work and may end up in a better-paying job than her husband. One Vietnamese wife believes that the new pressures, roles, and equality have caused the divorce rate among Vietnamese couples in America to rise rapidly. She added that to be successful in the business world, she had to be aggressive, assertive, and efficient, but when she was with her own people, she wished to be a Vietnamese woman—shy, patient, and resilient.³⁹

Children are also caught in the familiar conflict between disparate cultural norms. In school they are taught to express opinions and ask why, whereas at home their parents want them to be more traditional and do what they are told. It will be interesting to see how the children will handle the question of culture conflict; it may well be that the experiences of earlier Asian groups such as the Chinese and the Japanese will serve as the model. Generational differences will no doubt appear as length of time in the United States increases.

Compatibility of Ethnic Culture with Host Society Norms and Values

Asian cultures generally fit into the dominant society through conformity and lack of overt conflict. In addition, the Vietnamese brought with them cultural values that were highly adaptive to the American society.⁴⁰ They came with a strong sense of the family, they wanted a better life for their children, and they had a high degree of achievement motivation. Vietnamese culture encourages responsibility, discipline, and hard work; prefers that adversity be faced with courage and stoicism; and places a high value on education.

Role of the Federal Government and Voluntary Agencies

One of the features of the resettlement of the refugees has been the role played by the federal government and private voluntary agencies. Without cooperation between the public and private sectors, the enormous job of moving and placing the refugees could not have been done.

Sponsorship has included commitments to provide food, clothing, and shelter until the refugees became self-supporting. Sponsors were to help in finding employment, arranging for schools and medical services, and providing advice and counsel.

Liu, although acknowledging the positive contributions by both the public and private sectors, writes that government bureaucracies, operating in their customary fashion, showed little sensitivity to the culture of the Vietnamese, partly because very few Asians were involved in the program.⁴¹ Further, they adopted an assimilation strategy and delegated the resettlement task to a variety of private agencies that operated in a

nonuniform manner. The lack of coordination often caused confusion and conflict, both among the refugees and among the various agencies.

Federal financial assistance to the refugees has been helpful in the period of transition but has caused a variety of problems for the states, for it involved a time limit. In 1984, California had 300,000 to 350,000 of the 696,000 refugees taken into the United States since the 1975 fall of Saigon.⁴² A significant portion of the California refugees—some 140,000—were on welfare. The state's cost climbed from zero in 1980 to \$84 million in 1983 and an estimated \$140 million in 1984. It should be recalled that the federal government provided total reimbursement for public assistance for the first three years, after which it was left to the state and local authorities to assume up to one-half of the costs, the same share that they assume for non-refugee populations on welfare.

Reception by the Host Society

Alden Roberts compared the attitudes of Gulf Coast residents and northern Californians regarding the refugees. Among Americans in the Gulf states, 77 percent disapproved of marriage to a Vietnamese, and 11 percent would exclude refugees from the country. Californians were more tolerant than the Gulf Coasters. Among a refugee sample, most perceived some prejudice, with the younger, more educated respondents reporting racism more often than the older, less educated, and less affluent members of the group.⁴³

Earlier studies also report conflicts between Americans and Vietnamese. In Texas and Florida, American fishermen have been upset by the fishing techniques of the Vietnamese.⁴⁴ Blacks and Chicanos have complained about the special assistance given to the refugees, thereby decreasing the resources available to their own minority communities.⁴⁵ Baldwin's survey indicated that Orange County residents were just as dissatisfied with refugee resettlement in 1984 as they were in 1981.⁴⁶ The feeling that "they must be getting a government handout" is strong,⁴⁷ and resentment that American taxpayers have paid for the progress (or nonprogress) of the refugees persists.

Skinner and Hendricks noted that certain conflicts involved the Vietnamese with other ethnic minorities.⁴⁸ In a number of universities, blacks and Chicanos confronted school officials with complaints that the refugees were receiving a disproportionate amount of financial aid, thereby decreasing their share. Similar conflicts have arisen in the area of public housing and other government services.

The experience of the refugees supports the views of Lipset and Raab, who identified several groups who would feel threatened by an influx of refugees.⁴⁹ The "once hads," often called nativists, would be threatened by any influx of foreigners, whereas the "never hads," made up of the disad-

vantaged, including minority groups, would complain of a double standard in funding priorities and competition for jobs.

Studies of refugees in Australia, Canada, and France seem to echo the experiences in the United States. Nancy Viviani, writing about the Vietnamese migration to Australia, reported growing antipathy toward all immigrants in that country.⁵⁰ Polls taken in the 1980s revealed that 45 percent of respondents believed that immigration was too high and that 48 percent believed that Asian immigration was too high. Economic issues, including unemployment and inflation, were major concerns. There was also a feeling that the entry of the refugees would threaten the homogeneity of the country. Viviani believes that the fear of racial conflict stems in part from the unresolved issue of the treatment of the Australian aborigines.

Louis Dorais, studying the refugees in Quebec City, emphasized linguistic and cultural adaptation.⁵¹ The presence of an educated bicultural elite, a relatively high level of economic integration, and positive expectations from the government contributed to the adaptation process.

Another Canadian study indicated that education, both academic and vocational, and length of residence were positively related to adjustment. Policy recommendations included an emphasis on education, patience, directing refugees to nonmetropolitan areas, and a focus on the elderly.⁵²

The attitudes of a sample drawn from a small city in France indicated a slight favorable response for the refugees to maintain their heritage and language, rather than losing them to assimilation. On attitudes toward specific immigrant groups, the North African Arabs were the least favored, the Southeast Asians the most favored.⁵³

It is apparent that the issues facing the Southeast Asians are strikingly similar to the issues faced by other immigrants from Asia. Past immigrants confronted racism, cultural differences, government bureaucracy, language difficulties, generational differences, and clashes in values. Questions about goals, including acculturation, "melting," integration, and biculturalism, remain issues for the older Asian immigrant groups and their progeny; the Southeast Asians have just started their journey into the American society.

Ethnic Identity

Identification as an ethnic minority provides certain advantages in the areas of employment, housing, health, education, and access to loans. It is what Milton Gordon labels corporate pluralism.⁵⁴ Skinner and Hendricks cite a 1979 speech before the National Coalition for Refugee Resettlement in Washington, DC, that examined some of the negative effects of ethnic minority labeling: Are the Vietnamese expected to assimilate as a minority group, which includes low-level jobs and a "job ceiling" above which they are not expected to compete? Does minority status reinforce a designation as outsiders? Does the categorization maintain a status quo rather than

bring about fundamental social change?⁵⁵ Without ethnic minority status, groups are free to compete with each other and to confront established economic and political institutions.

But it should also be emphasized that the Vietnamese, like other migrants from Asia, are physically identifiable and cannot merge into the dominant culture as easily as have those of European descent.⁵⁶ Minority status may be forced on them, just as being "recognized" as an Asian remains a reality for the Chinese and the Japanese, even of the fourth and fifth generations.

Occupation and Education

The most obvious sources of satisfaction for any migrating group will be to find decent jobs and a good education for the next generation. Baldwin reported that in the prime employment group, defined as those between the ages of 25 and 54, some 45 percent of the men and 28 percent of the women were employed full time in Orange County.⁵⁷ Lack of English skills and the unavailability of child care were cited as the main obstacles to employment. Vietnamese have found employment as assembly line workers, technicians, machine operators, and office workers.

There have been problems of underemployment and the lack of Vietnamese in supervisory positions. Intraethnic conflict can occur—especially in cases of previously lower-status employees in the home country giving orders to former high-ranking army officers or males taking orders from females. Prior to the influx of refugees, Hispanics held many of the local assembly line positions, and accusations of job infringement have been reported by employers.⁵⁸

Barry Stein compared the occupational adjustment of Vietnamese refugees with non-Asian refugee groups.⁵⁹ He found that in the same period, four to eight years after arrival, the Vietnamese were doing better than Cuban refugees and not as well as the Hungarian refugees of 1956 and the refugees from Nazi Germany. There was much downward mobility, but he believed that this pattern would be ameliorated by time, acculturation, language improvement, retraining programs, hard work, and determination. The early years are the most critical, for if problems are not solved early, discouragement follows, and refugees may resign themselves to dependence on the public welfare system.

The language barrier appears to be the most immediate problem for refugees. It creates misunderstandings and hinders effective communication. Further, because refugee status arose from political/military decisions and events and not from conscious decisions to emigrate, solutions may have to include more than individual motivation. The economic disadvantages and psychological struggles of populations caught in events beyond their control place them in a different position from that of the voluntary immigrant.

Precise data about education are difficult to obtain because of the newness of the migration, but there is a general belief that the Southeast Asians, especially the Vietnamese, will do well in school. One young girl has even won a national spelling contest, and there are enough students attending major universities to form a Vietnamese Students Association. We are personally acquainted with several ethnic Chinese families from Vietnam whose children are attending or have graduated from American universities. It is a remarkable educational record for families that entered the country so recently and with a language handicap.

Current Adaptation

James Freeman's interviews with a number of Vietnamese—not generals, leaders, or celebrities but common folks—provide a number of pertinent generalizations concerning the Southeast Asian experience.⁶⁰ Culture conflict was a strong theme—the refugees were grateful for the basic freedoms found in America, but they felt that they were in, but not yet a part of, the American culture. Differences in customs and lifestyles were common; there was also a tremendous ignorance on the part of government agencies, which often lumped all of the various Southeast Asian groups together. They were pushed into English classes and job-training programs that were often unsuitable; children who did not understand English were often labeled mentally retarded. Laotian speakers were brought in to assist refugees who spoke no Lao; Freeman himself writes that although he had lived in Southeast Asia, he never fully understood nor appreciated the lifestyles, customs, values, and traditions of the area.

Freeman believes that the refugees have been good to America, that they have provided an invigorating force, and that America is better off because of their contributions. He concludes:

For many people who were born in Vietnam, life in America, despite its positive features, also retains its heavy burdens: the necessity to adjust to a world that is not "at ease," the memories of war, flight from oppression, and relatives left behind; the dream of returning to an idealized homeland that no longer exists. The successes of the Vietnamese-Americans are all the more remarkable when they are considered in light of what these people have endured.⁶¹

The cultural interaction between Americans and the refugees is summarized by Robert Proudfoot, who lists twenty-six areas of frustration for both sides. They include American bureaucracy, cultural and value differences, unrealistically high expectations of success, unprepared sponsors, the lumping together of all refugees, too rapid an influx of refugees, inadequate health screening, and enormous language barriers.⁶²

Proudfoot also summarizes a number of steps that would help refugees to adapt to American society. They include strengthening the al-

ready existing family units, working toward self-help mechanisms in the community, examining programs for teaching and learning English, and understanding the clash of values.

Young-Yun Kim, examining the adaptation patterns of Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Vietnamese refugees, indicated that a key variable was English competence.⁶³ In general, English competence meant higher participation in interpersonal and mass communications, as well as better psychological health and functional fitness.

SUMMARY

Southeast Asian refugees are extraordinarily diverse. They bring a variety of backgrounds, differences in culture and history, and a heterogeneity of skills and experiences. Yet there is a tendency to lump them together as "refugees from Southeast Asia." That may conjure up the stereotypical image of boat people, of the refugee girl who won the national spelling bee, or of large families struggling to make ends meet in urban slums.

They do share some commonalities, however. The usual combination of variables that have affected all newcomers to the United States—motivations, skills and aspirations, and the strength of community and family—will determine part of their future. Another part of the equation, as for all migrating groups, will be the reaction of the dominant society, which also includes other minorities, both Asian and non-Asian.

What little evidence we have concerning the refugees indicates that many are having a difficult time. Chapter 12, in which we cover empirical data on such variables as employment and income, shows that the Southeast Asians are behind white Americans and the more established Asian groups. It would be surprising if such were not the case. The conditions of emigration—panic, inadequate time, little planning; problems in transit; life in temporary centers; then entrance into a modern, industrial society—would strain the adaptive capacities of most individuals.

Tom Owan, discussing the problems of refugees with human services workers, suggests three themes—all relevant to how we deal with *all* people who are different.⁶⁴ First is to be sensitive to the various cultures and life experiences and to recognize both similarities and differences. Communication patterns, feelings, and emotions may not be expressed in the American manner, so assumptions based on the American culture may be misleading. Second, culturally relevant frames for understanding must be studied, identified, and used. Patience and flexibility will be rewarded. Finally, there is a need for competent and well-trained personnel who can provide the assistance that the newcomers need. The sink-or-swim philosophy that has guided immigrant policy in previous eras may have to be rethought as we move from a resource-rich to a resource-limited society.

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