

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #3

Our Journeys, Our Communities:
Southeast Asians In American History

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*We float on the deep and dark ocean
Like dust on a palm leaf¹
Vietnamese monk- Los Angeles*

INTERSECTIONS AND DIVERGENCIES

Like other immigrant and refugee communities in the U.S, Southeast Asian Americans reflect tremendous diversity in terms of their histories, ethnic compositions, languages, and cultures. Although the region of Southeast Asia is comprised of 11 countries, the communities that have come to be commonly known as “Southeast Asian Americans” trace their origin to three countries on mainland Southeast Asia, namely Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and to the war that has come to be referred to as the “Vietnam War.” In fundamental aspects, these communities are bound by shared geographical space and by their contemporary political experiences. Though their histories intersect in important dimensions; they also diverge at critical junctures. Commonalities notwithstanding, the societies, cultures, and historical experiences of these communities are also distinct from one another. Despite their diversity, however, Southeast Asians in America are often viewed and regarded as one homogeneous community. The common tendency to lump all refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia into an undifferentiated rubric of “Indochinese” or even “Southeast Asian” masks the distinctions and disparities that exist not only *among* the various ethnic groups but also between the different resettlement waves *within* each refugee community. They are usually defined in terms of the timing of resettlement, i.e., between those who were resettled in 1975–1976 and the later arrivals of the 1980s and 1990s. These disparities



are attributable to a number of factors, principally to differences in pre-migration histories and experiences of the individual refugee and, collectively, of the communities, including the extent and nature of their relationship with the United States.

The diversity of the Southeast Asian communities is most pronounced in terms of ethnicity. While ethnic minorities are present in all three countries, Laos is the most pluralistic. With close to 80% of the country being mountainous, the population of Laos can be categorized broadly into lowland and highland communities. Lowland ethnic Lao comprised approximately 40% of the population; the remaining 60% of the population consisted of some 60 ethnic communities and linguistic groups. This ethnic, linguistic and cultural pluralism is particularly significant given that Laos was a small country with approximately two million people in the 1960s and early 1970s. A large community of Laotian, namely Hmong, Mien, Thai Dam, and Khmu, have emerged in California's Central Valley and in America's Midwest while lowland Lao are dispersed throughout many states, with a long-standing community in San Diego, California.

Laos was not the only source country of Southeast Asian highland refugees in America. Beginning in 2002, refugees from the Central Highland of Vietnam who fled religious, economic and cultural persecution, were also resettled in the U.S. Moreover, some highland communities such as the Thai Dam had been repeatedly displaced throughout the region prior to the exodus to America. Pushed southward from China by repressive political and economic conditions in the 1800s, some Thai Dam initially resettled in northern Vietnam. Unable to live under a socialist regime, many were forced to move to the southern part of Vietnam following the establishment of the socialist state in the north in 1946, and the formal partition of the country in 1954. Encountering discrimination and marginalization, a segment of the Thai Dam population subsequently moved onward to Laos only to be displaced by the war in the 1960s–1970s. Some 3000 Thai Dams are now refugees in Des Moines, Iowa. Speaking to this long history of forced and repeated displacement, a Thai Dam leader reflected: “We are a people who have many places to go and nowhere to stay.”²



Another ethnic group that is also highly represented among the refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is the Chinese. The first wave of the “boat people” exodus from Vietnam in 1978 consisted principally of ethnic Chinese. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Chinese settlement in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia predated the arrival of the Europeans, but increased significantly during the colonial period. Seen as an important economic force, the Chinese were encouraged to migrate to Southeast Asia by colonial incentives. Following independence, they remained the economic backbone of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In the post-1975 period, in all three countries, ethnic Chinese were particularly affected by the socialist regime’s attack of the capitalist class. In Vietnam, persecution of ethnic Chinese intensified with the escalated tension between Vietnam and China in 1977–1978, and culminated in their forced exit from Vietnam. Even the long - standing Chinese community in North Vietnam became targets of ethnic persecution:

“It began with work. Some Chinese were dismissed or transferred to bad jobs. In Haiphong, the Vietnamese used to call us friend or comrade. Now, they started to insult us. I felt very depressed. One day, some people came and dumped a load of rubble and sand right on the path right in front of my house. One of them said ‘He is leaving. He will go and his house will be mine.’ They didn’t drive us out but they did things that made it impossible to stay...I lost my job in Haiphong harbour. No explanation. It was not like we were dismissed. It was like we had disappeared.”³

In the South, local authorities also benefited from the forced departure of the ethnic Chinese:

“The communists decided that they couldn’t change our attitudes. ..Since we refused to go to the countryside to produce as farmers and sooner or later would have fled anyway, they decided they [sic] might as well collect our gold and let us go.”⁴

Though they were later joined by ethnic Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese constituted the majority of the first wave of the “boat people” exodus of the late 1970s. In the U.S., the entrepreneurial skills and resources of ethnic Chinese refugees from Southeast Asia



contributed significantly to the growth of thriving economic centers and ethnic enclaves, such as those in San Jose and in Westminster, California.

Additionally, a small community of Muslim Chams can also be counted among the Southeast Asian refugee population in the U.S. Following the political disintegration of the kingdom of Champa (located in what is now modern day Central Vietnam) in the 15th century, the Chams were dispersed throughout mainland Southeast Asia. In addition to the population that remained in Vietnam, Cham communities are found in Cambodia and Laos. They were part of the refugee exodus from all three countries in the late 1970s and 1980s.

In addition to ethnic diversity, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia also have rich cultural and linguistic traditions that differ from one another. Because of early contact with India and China, these two cultural traditions left deep imprints throughout Southeast Asia. The influence of China is most notable in Vietnam, and among highland communities who can trace their origin to China, such as the Mien, the Hmong, and the Thai Dam. Chinese ideographs, for instance, were used in Hmong ancient texts. In Vietnam, the long period of Chinese occupation had left deeply embedded legacies. Chinese influence permeated many aspects of Vietnamese society, from the structure and system of governance to literary traditions, rites, and rituals. Confucian principles molded Vietnamese social relations and political culture, and in spite of the Romanization of the Vietnamese script, the Chinese system of writing continues to mark high literary tradition.

The influence of India, on the other hand, is most evident in Khmer (Cambodian) and lowland Lao cultures. Like the influence of China in other parts of Southeast Asia, legacies of the early and extensive contact with India are reflected in the systems of writing and literary traditions, court rituals, culinary tastes, architecture and artistic productions of many Southeast Asian societies and cultures.

Contact with the West, particularly the periods of conquest and colonization, also fundamentally shaped the societies of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Although all three countries were subjected to French colonial rule, the timing, depth and scope of contact



differed from country to country, and from region to region. French colonial pre-occupation was centered in Vietnam, particularly in the southern region, then known as Cochinchina. Colonial control over Laos and Cambodia was established later and was less extensive. In contrast to the socioeconomic and political dislocations in Vietnam, French indirect rule over Laos and Cambodia left traditional authority and society relatively intact, albeit under colonial grip. Catholicism, for instance, never made the same headway in Laos and Cambodia as it did in Vietnam, and despite their efforts, the French never succeeded in Romanizing the Khmer or Lao script.

Adversely, the relative lack of colonial interest in Cambodia and Laos also meant the absence of critical investment in the countries' development. This was particularly evident in education. A secondary school was not established in Cambodia until 1936. Similarly in Laos, formal Western-style education was introduced relatively late in the 1930s and, as elsewhere in the colonies, largely accessible only to the privileged class. As a result, during the colonial period, most Cambodian and Laotian élites had to pursue higher education in Vietnam where secondary and post-secondary educational institutions were more developed. In the pre-literate highland communities, educational access was even more limited. The currently used written Hmong language, which is Romanized, was acquired only in the 1950s as a result of contact with French missionaries. Even then, literacy was largely limited to the privileged male population.

The priority that France placed on Vietnam was maintained by the United States when it emerged as the principal power in the region following the collapse of the French colonial regime. In what was to become America's longest war, spanning close to three decades, Vietnam remained the central focus. Though the conflict spread to neighboring Laos and Cambodia, American military and political commitment was centered on Vietnam. Until the Communist victory in 1975, Laos and Cambodia were mere "sideshowes" to American military objectives in Vietnam. They were of strategic importance to the U.S. because of the shared borders with Vietnam and because of the access and cross-border sanctuaries used by Vietnamese communists. The Ho Chi Minh Trail that snaked through neutral Laos and Cambodia was an indispensable supply route, bringing in critical reinforcement of men and material to the war efforts in South



Vietnam. Because of both countries' neutrality, however, American involvement in Laos and Cambodia was kept covert, and out of American congressional and public scrutiny. The "secret" war in Laos was made possible by the recruitment of the highland ethnic minorities, also commonly referred to as the *montagnards*. From its modest inception in 1960, this initiative successfully recruited some 10,000 soldiers, mostly Hmong and Mien, by 1964. They were a critical fighting force and an indispensable asset in intelligence gathering and in the recovery of personnel and sensitive materials from planes that were shot down over Laos. One former soldier recalled: "I belong to a tribe of proud people, the Hmong. We always helped the Americans in the war and now, after the war, we fight alone."⁵

Similarly, Cambodia's neutrality also made covert involvement necessary in the late 1960s. Even after the escalation of conflict, and the destruction of the country's neutrality in 1970, America's involvement in Cambodia remained limited in scale and scope relative to Vietnam. American ground troops were withdrawn a few months after the incursion in May 1970, and in the ensuing 5 years of conflict, America's military role in Cambodia was curtailed by Congressional amendments. In short, unlike the protracted and large scale U.S. presence in Vietnam, and unlike the special relationship that the U.S. military developed with the highland Laotian communities, the political and military ties between the U.S. and Cambodia were, in comparison, limited in scope and short-term in duration.

The differing nature and level of America's political and military relationship with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had critical implications for the number of refugees that were resettled in the United States in 1975. Because of the long-standing and multifaceted relationship that the U.S. had with South Vietnam, there was a much larger number of Vietnamese refugees, totaling 135,000, who were resettled in 1975. For the most part, these were individuals and families deemed most likely to be persecuted under a communist regime—or who could leverage their connections with the Americans to secure their exit. Most were ranking civilian officials and military personnel, including pilots who flew their helicopters to the U.S. carriers on the high seas. Among the elites



and the connected, were a small handful of individuals, mostly fishermen and coastal residents, who had access to boats.

In contrast, the relatively miniscule number of Cambodians evacuated with U.S. embassy personnel in April 1975, consisting of approximately 80 families, underscored the incipient nature of the relationship and of American commitment. In all, only 4600 Cambodians were resettled in 1975, mostly people who were already outside of the country and could not return to Cambodia. From Laos, a total of 11,000 refugees were resettled in the U.S. between 1975 and 1976. Largely because of their special relationship with American military, the Hmong came to represent the largest ethnic minority group from Laos to be resettled in the U.S., even though they were not the largest minority community in Laos. In 1975, some 3000 Hmongs, mostly ranking officers and their families, were airlifted from the American military bases in the Laotian highlands. Others fled on their own. One Hmong refugee recalled his perilous journey: “ That night, we crossed the Mekong on bamboo floats with no stars and no moon.”⁶

WAR, REVOLUTION AND EXILE: IMPLICATIONS FOR LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

The end of the Vietnam War did not herald a time of peace and prosperity for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Under the socialist regimes, many Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotians suffered from economic hardship and political persecution. A large number of Vietnamese and Laotian civilian and military elites were sent to re-education camps, sometimes euphemistically referred to as “seminars.” Similar to the Soviet “gulags,” these were essentially political prisons where detainees, some confined for decades, were subjected to hard labor, harsh punitive treatment, and food deprivation. One Vietnamese prisoner who was sent to the Central Highlands recalled his incarceration experience:

“ We were locked in small rooms in which we were so crowded that there was not enough sleeping space for everyone at once. We had to build platforms to stack people for sleeping. About 80 or 90 people would be locked into a room six meters wide and about twice that long. In rooms that measured 8 by 24 meters, the Communists put 150



to 200 men. Our own clothes and blankets were not enough to keep us warm, and we had nothing else. We made our own extra clothing with U.S.A sandbags. That helped us quite a bit.

To add to our misery, we found that fish were swimming in the well we used for drinking water. This revealed that the well was polluted, since the fish had found an underground channel leading from the nearby lake into which we drained the waste from our latrines. That was our only source of drinking water during our entire internment.”⁷

Such punitive systems also existed in Laos. There, it was estimated that at least 40,000 individuals were sent to the re-education camps.⁸ Many, including the Lao royal family, perished.

In Vietnam, those charged with lesser political crimes were sent to New Economic Zones (NEZs). Some individuals and families volunteered to be relocated to these areas in order to escape the watchful eye of the regime:

“My father did not want the ‘uneducated, power-hungry and paranoid’ that now runs the government to pester and harass him about his past after 3 years in re-education camp. And we needed to create a new life in this new country. Farming was the only thing that was left for people like us. And in the NEZs, one could reinvent oneself by creating new identity.”

A Vietnamese refugee who left Vietnam in 1980.

Like many of the re-education camps, the NEZs often malaria-infested areas that urban relocatees were sent to reclaim under extreme conditions. Some 300,000 relocatees from Saigon alone were sent to the NEZs.

“Most NEZs were very primitive, and life was extremely harsh. People who escaped from the NEZs described the conditions as uniformly bad. Officially, settlers were supposed to receive 6 months’ worth of food supplies, some seeds and tools and a hut. But most of the time, they found no housing facilities whatsoever, and sometimes no source of drinking water...Lack of medicines



increased the incidence of disease. Malaria and dysentery were rampant, pneumonia and skin diseases widespread...Shortages of all kinds and poor sanitary conditions caused such hardship and deprivation that death rates rose, particularly among young children and the aged.”⁹

While all three countries underwent tremendous dislocations in the post-war years, the Khmer Rouge revolution in Cambodia resulted in the death of over one million out of approximately seven million Cambodians over the span of less than four years. Devastation was most acute among the educated, artists, and religious authorities, i.e., the key pillars of Cambodian society. In the attempt to radically transform the social system, the Khmer Rouge did away with the concepts of private property, cash economy, religion, traditional class structure, and even the family institution. Individuals were assigned to different workteams according to their age and gender. Constantly on the move from one work site to another, team members labored, lived, and ate communally. Children, sometimes as young as five years old, were taken away from their families and placed in youth camps where they were subjected to back-breaking labor, starvation, and terror. Many were never able to reunite with their parents. Thinking back to the labor camp to which she was sent to live, Mali, who now lives in southern California, recalled:

“I was crippled for one year. It was just a small scratch but it started to spread and got deeper...I had to crawl to the eating hall to get my ration, otherwise I wouldn’t get any food...Some of the children were so debilitated by fatigue and starvation that if they slipped and fell into the rice paddies, they couldn’t pick themselves up, so they drowned.”¹⁰

The impact of the Khmer Rouge brutal regime’s “auto-genocidal”¹¹ policies on the Cambodian society, family and cultural institutions, and on the Cambodian psyche, is immeasurable. With much of Cambodian culture resting on oral tradition, the death of master artists and community elders meant the irretrievable loss of critical aspects of culture. Death, disappearance, and separation during flight and migration also destabilized the Cambodian family institution. In a recent study of Cambodians in Long Beach, California, one of the biggest Cambodian communities in the U.S., 92% of the



parents surveyed reported having family members or friends who were murdered under the Khmer Rouge regime. This finding is corroborated by another survey of Cambodian refugees in which 95% of the respondents have family members who died "in an unusual manner."¹² The trauma from these losses and from protracted exposure to violence and fear was to leave long-term legacies among the survivors. Studies of Cambodian communities in America reveal a high rate of trauma-related disorder among the refugees.

It is in this context of war, of social, political and economic dislocations that accompany socialist reforms, of ethnic persecution, and of genocidal outcomes as in the case of Cambodia, that one must situate the refugee exodus from Southeast Asia. While prior to 1975, Southeast migration within and beyond the region did occur, the scale and scope of displacement of the last 30 years is without historical precedence. The peaks and flows of emigration correlate with developments in the source countries. In Vietnam and Laos, the late 1970s saw a tightening of state control over the economy and the society. The attack against the elite and capitalist class came to acquire an increasingly wide sweep that impacted small entrepreneurs, the lower-middle class and professionals. Many fled out of their sense of vulnerability because of their ethnic or class background. Tightened state control and repression further weakened the already declining economies. Underemployment and poverty became widespread and were particularly destabilizing in the urban areas. As a result, while the initial wave of the "boat refugees" from Vietnam was comprised largely of ethnic Chinese; ethnic Vietnamese, seeking to escape economic hardship, soon joined in the exodus. Whereas the Vietnamese government had promoted the forced exit of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, it sought to forcefully prevent the flight of ethnic Vietnamese. Those caught seeking to escape were jailed. Amerasians who had been marginalized economically and socially because of their biracial heritage and association with America also sought resettlement in the U.S. Most, however, came through the Orderly Departure Program which was established in 1979 as part of the understanding reached between the Vietnamese government, the UN High Commissioner of Refugees and resettlement countries, including the U.S. as an alternative to the clandestine and perilous journeys on the high seas.¹³ By 1983 39,475 Vietnamese had left under the ODP program.¹⁴ Along with the economic hardship, much of which was



politically induced, Southeast Asian refugees were also fleeing other repressive conditions that accounted for the peak migration in the late 1970s through the 1980s, and for the persisting refugee stream from the region. In Cambodia, the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 and the ensuing famine that followed the country's occupation by Vietnam created both the opportunity and the added impetus for flight. Vietnam, along with the continued presence of boat refugees, the late 1980s to mid-1990s saw the release and eventual resettlement in the U.S. of many political detainees, while stepped up repression of ethnic minorities in the Central Highland, many of whom had fought alongside with the Americans, generated new refugee waves. After a brief lull, resettlement of Laotian refugees, principally the Hmong, picked up in 2004 with the admission of Hmong refugees who had been living, unauthorized, in Thailand since the formal closure of the refugee camps over a decade ago.

Regardless of the country of origin and the circumstances of flight, for many refugees, migration entails repeated and compounding losses and trauma that begin prior to exit and continue through resettlement. Many families were unable to flee together. In many instances, families were able to amass enough resources to pay for the illegal passage of only a few members of the family. Further fragmentation of the family occurred as a result of death and disappearances during the perilous flight across treacherous mountain terrains and minefields or on the high seas. For many refugees, lengthy stays in refugee camps engendered additional experiences of deprivation and disruption in many aspects of their social and economic lives. It was in the context of these compounding and multidimensional dislocations, that Southeast Asian refugees have had to rebuild their lives in America.

LEGACIES OF WAR, GENOCIDE AND DISPLACEMENT ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

For many Southeast Asian groups, the process of rebuilding lives and communities has been severely challenged by the loss of critical human resources, the erosion of key institutions and support systems, and by the historical traumas. The dislocations are acute for the Cambodian refugee community. For one, Buddhism, once a



cementing social force in Cambodian and lowland Lao communities, has been undermined by the deaths of senior monks, destruction of religious texts, the experience of genocide, and the economic and legal constraints of the host society. Community development has also been deterred by the shortage of human resources. Given the limited number of the educated and professional classes who were able to escape in 1975, and the ensuing genocide in Cambodia that targeted those who remained behind, very few of the urbane, skilled and educated are found among surviving Cambodian refugees.

Moreover, for many refugees, the struggles did not end with migration. The historical traumas that they endured prior to migration are often compounded by the challenges of resettlement. Many Southeast Asian families were resettled into economically impoverished neighborhoods, already plagued with high unemployment, endemic poverty, and crime. Lack of economic and educational access continues to impede social advancement.

The challenges are also found within the home. Especially for former re-education camp detainees from Vietnam, family reunification has meant learning to readjust to being a family once again after years of absence and separation. With women forced into the position of the principal breadwinner and youths having had to take on adult responsibilities, family dynamics have been fundamentally altered. Moreover, in resettlement, uneven rates of adjustment and acculturation, along with fundamental changes in family structure and dynamics and of traditional roles, contributed to the tension that has emerged along gender and generational lines. One elderly Vietnamese spoke of the challenges and predicaments of a refugee family:

“In America, there is nothing to hold our family together. In this city alone, my family numbers some 16 people spanning three generations... We also have others of our family living elsewhere in America. Even so, we have nothing to look forward to. If I returned to Vietnam, the Communists would put me in a re-education camp, which would kill me. But here in America, my wife and I will die a lonely death, abandoned by our children”.¹⁵



In many refugee families, children, with their rapid acquisition of the English language, often assume the role of information and cultural brokers, and are delegated power and responsibilities that far exceed their social maturity. Such role reversals can have a detrimental effect on families that come from cultural traditions that emphasize parental authority and age hierarchy. For their part, younger Southeast Asians, imbued with American notions of individualism and egalitarianism, have a hard time coping with age and gender hierarchies in their families and community, and reconciling the tension between Western and Southeast Asian norms.

Young Southeast Asian women, in particular, find it difficult to negotiate different and, at times, conflicting, cultural norms, in large part because cultural restrictions apply more strictly to Southeast Asian women than to men. Though their experiences may vary somewhat depending on class or whether they lived in urban or rural communities, for the most part young Southeast Asian women are expected to have little social life outside the home. Gender interaction, in particular, is rather proscribed. As a result, many young women are discouraged from pursuing extracurricular activities in high school, which may have an impact on their education given that many colleges place a certain premium on ‘educational well-roundedness’ in their admission decision. Many young Southeast Asian women also feel that they are not given the same amount of encouragement to pursue their career aspirations. A Mien student from Richmond, California, explained:

Our parents and grandparents still uphold the gender boundaries. This strict bias, particularly against single females (moving) towards higher education, causes them to refrain from taking the opportunity to study at great institutions that are most likely far away from home. ¹⁶

A 16-year-old Cambodian American student spoke of the difficulty in juggling multiple cultural expectations:

High school is difficult because we want to be accepted by our peers but we also want to be accepted by our families and communities... Sometimes, adults don't understand how difficult it is



growing up in America... What they went through and all that, that's difficult, but our lives are difficult too, just in a different way.¹⁷

Because of the generational and linguistic divide, families often are unable to address these issues openly. As a result, many Southeast Asian parents feel that the empowerment of youths in America has resulted in the *disempowerment* of the elders. In turn, Southeast Asian youths often feel deprived of support at home. Frustrated by their seeming inability to reconcile differing expectations and cultural norms, some may look to their peers, including gangs, for the community, self esteem, and sense of identity and belonging that elude them elsewhere. All too often, the compounding pressure of trying to rebuild a new life in an unfamiliar context, stress of intergenerational conflict and endemic violence of America's inner cities translates into violence in the home.

The violence that permeates their daily lives is also in the form of racism and its all too often tragic consequences. As refugees from the Vietnam War, Southeast Asians are living reminders of an ignominious chapter of U.S. foreign policy, a highly divisive era at home, and protracted postwar scars. Problematic rendering of the war by Hollywood and depiction of Southeast Asians in popular media reinforce anti-immigrant sentiments. Visibly clustered largely in neighborhoods that are already socially and economically impacted, they are vulnerable to scathing stereotypes and racially motivated violence. On July 14, 2001, in New Hampshire, Richard Labbe brutally murdered Tung Phetakoune, an elderly Laotian man, as a “payback” for losing relatives in Vietnam, while proclaiming to the police that “...those Asians killed Americans and you won't do anything about it so I will”.¹⁸ In Colorado Springs, Lyuen Phan Nguyen, a student at the University of Miami was chased and beaten to death for objecting to racial slurs at a campus party. In 1989, in Stockton, California, Patrick Purdy opened fire on Cleveland Elementary, a school with significant Southeast Asian student population, killing five Southeast Asian children, and wounding 29 children. The crime was deemed racially motivated.



THE IMPORTANCE OF “VOICE” IN HISTORY

Though their resettlement in the U.S. has been relatively recent, these communities have made a positive impact on American economy, politics, and education. Southeast Asian resettlement has stabilized and revitalized many blighted neighborhoods, while economic enclaves such as Little Saigon in Westminster, California, and Little Phnom-Penh in Long Beach have enriched America’s economic and cultural landscapes. Southeast Asians, many of them first-generation refugees, have also risen to political prominence in local, state and national arenas, and are making a positive impact on our nation’s policies. Others, especially among the younger generation, have played important roles in grassroots social advocacy and in the arts.

The presence of these new communities is especially evident in the educational arena and in the workforce. In many school districts, particularly in California, Texas, and Minnesota, Southeast Asian languages are now ranked among the most spoken among student populations. Stories of refugee students becoming valedictorians and gaining admission to top ranking universities despite their traumatic experiences, limited English proficiency, and economic hardship, are numerous. With regard to the pre-literate Laotian highland communities in particular, the achievements are remarkable. There are now an estimated 889 Hmongs with graduate and professional degrees, 304 of whom are women. Moreover, Southeast Asian Americans can now be counted among ranked faculty at leading research and teaching institutions. Southeast Asian Americans have also become an important force in many critical sectors of America’s economy, from high-tech research and development in the Silicon Valley to the agricultural labor force in California’s Central Valley.

Despite the growth of the Southeast Asian American community and its significant impact on American society, politics, and economy, Southeast Asian voices and narratives are (to borrow Helen Zia’s term) still “Missing In History.”¹⁹ Little is written of the intertwining histories of these communities and U.S. foreign policies in Southeast Asia, of the political forces that compelled their forced migration to America, or of the significant contributions that they have made as new Americans. If that chapter



of America's longest war is addressed at all, it is often through the focus on Vietnam and on the U.S. The term "Vietnam War" belies the fact that Laos and Cambodia were also subjected to war and devastation. Given the demographic shift that America is experiencing, it is all the more important that our educational curriculum reflects the histories and experiences of our increasingly diverse student communities. Though they are integral chapters of America's history, these narratives and perspectives have essentially been neglected in our curriculum. This intellectual gap needs to be redressed if we are to realize America's full potential as a pluralistic democracy.

*...I awoke and thought for a long time that we are a lost and forgotten people...
But still we have a story to tell. I heard so many voices. Who will listen to these
stories? There are many voices from Indochina.²⁰*

-O Pham-
Cambodian Refugee

FOOTNOTES

¹ "A Prayer for Safe Shore" in Tenhula, *Voices From Southeast Asia*, 60.

² Khatharya Um, conversation with Dinh Van Lo, Thai Dam leader and president of the Thai Dam association in Des Moines, Iowa. Boston 1995.

³ Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*, (New York, Zed Books, 1998), 30.

⁴ Robinson, *Ibid*, 31.

⁵ Pang Vang Khang, "Mekong Crossing" in Tenhula, *Voices From Southeast Asia*, 76.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ James Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow*, (Stanford University Press, 1989), 243.

⁸ David Haines, edited. *Refugees in the United States: A Reference Handbook*, (Connecticut Greenwood Press, 1985), 154.

⁹ Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: the Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*, (New York, Zed Books, 1998), 27.

¹⁰ Um, *Brotherhood of the Pure* University of California, Berkeley, 1990. See also Um, *Born From the Ashes* (in press, University of California, Press).

¹¹ I used the term "auto-genocidal" to refer to self-inflicted mass atrocities committed by the ethnic group as a way of emphasizing that death of ethnic Khmers during the Khmer Rouge regime far exceeded the rate in other communities.

¹² Cited in Him Chhim, Testimonial at the Southeast Asian Education Summit, Washington D.C. 2001.

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¹³ Nguyen Kien, *The Unwanted*, (Brown and Company, 2001).

¹⁴ Nguyen Man Hung, "The Vietnamese," *Refugees in the United States: A Reference Handbook*, (Connecticut Greenwood Press, 1985), 200.

¹⁵ Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow*, (Stanford University Press, 1989), 367.



¹⁶ Ibid. See also, Um “A Dream Denied,” SEARAC Publication, Washington D.C. 2002 and Um, “Scars of War,” in *Unfamiliar Partners*, a publication of the national Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cited in Southeast Asian Advocacy Network.

¹⁹ Zia in *A People Looking Forward*, Interim Report to the President and The Nation, Executive Summary, January 2001.

²⁰ O Pham, in Tenhula, *Voices From Southeast Asia*, (Holmes Meier, New York, 1991), preface.

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