

JANA K. LIPMAN

*In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates.*

Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. 328 pages.

Guam, 1975: Vietnamese men waged a hunger strike and public head-shaving demonstration to demand repatriation to Vietnam. After the collapse of South Vietnam months earlier, some two thousand evacuees in a camp in Guam decided they did not want to resettle in the United States. Philippines, 1996: Vietnamese camp members tried to physically block a flight bound for Vietnam carrying rejected asylum seekers. Spanning four host contexts from 1975 to 2005, Jana K. Lipman's book absorbingly uncovers how Vietnamese in camps, regional authorities, and diasporic activists shaped the politics of refugee status determination. Lipman charts the uneven transformation of Vietnamese from de facto refugees to asylum seekers and repatriates.

Analyzing declassified documents, media coverage, and interviews, Lipman offers several interventions to the study of refugees. First, the author shows how different actors addressed refugee resettlement with plural, often contradictory, aims. Vietnamese in camps at times threatened or committed self-harm to demand repatriation (chapter 1). They inverted the roles of caretaker and care recipient by offering gifts to local teachers (chapter 3). Likewise, the host territories of Guam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong interpreted international refugee policy through their own sovereign interests: while Malaysia contended with its own Chinese population (chapter 2), Hong Kong weighed its treatment of Vietnamese arrivals against the economic, social, and political uncertainties of Hong Kong's imminent reincorporation into China (chapters 4–5). Finally,

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diasporic activists diverged in their campaigns to either promote Vietnamese integration in the Philippines or to resettle Vietnamese in North America (chapter 6).

By highlighting a range of actors and interests, the book offers an important reference for the interdisciplinary field of critical refugee studies. The author shows how everyday people at times rejected the refugee label and its accompanying connotations of gratitude and victimhood. As the book convincingly shows, “refugee” is a label that everyday people mobilize to claim or reject. The book explores these dynamics through sharp prose and memorable accounts, such as an embarrassing photo op of US naval officers having to carry a portrait of Hồ Chí Minh to return it to some departing repatriates who had forgotten it.

In answer to the book’s central questions of “Who is a refugee? Who determines this status?” (4), *In Camps* argues that it depends on “international power dynamics . . . specific regional pressures on first-asylum territories and activism within the camps themselves” (4) as well as “political networks of Vietnamese in the diaspora” (5). We find the author’s assertion convincing, but note a mismatch between one of the guiding questions and the book’s claims. At times, the book seems to answer who *gets* to be a refugee, rather than who *is* a refugee. While using a term such as “refugee” to reflect historical documents and contemporary discourse (19), the book asserts that “Vietnamese generally left home for political reasons” (21). This implies an answer to the question of who is a refugee—someone who experiences persecution. How should we make sense of individuals from central and northern Vietnam who also claimed asylum, but on the grounds of “economic hardship” (12)? In a country recovering from a decades-long conflict that involved anti-colonial efforts, it is difficult to disentangle the political from the economic and social.

Second, readers might be helped along by more conceptual elaboration of humanitarianism and human rights, which frame much of the book’s discussion. Humanitarianism and human rights purportedly came into conflict in each host site and beyond. But the book’s discussions often touch on competing understandings of humanitarianism, rather than humanitarianism versus human rights. For example, observers charged Malaysia with failing to fulfill humanitarian promises by “pushing off”

boats from its shores. Malaysia responded by claiming that “the Vietnamese push-offs *were* humanitarian” (76) because they prevented people from being detained in overcrowded, decrepit camps. Readers would therefore benefit from more context in discerning the author’s definition of humanitarianism.

Third, the book “argues that in order to understand refugee politics, one must look at the camps, the places that hosted them, and the people inside” (4). But it then needs to specify what we gain from looking in camps that we would miss looking elsewhere. For example, scholars of migration have long asserted that the contexts that receive border crossers matter immensely for their life opportunities. These contexts include coethnic communities. Without looking in camps, these scholars arrive at the same conclusion as this book: the host context and people in it powerfully shape the lived experiences of individuals. To be sure, the author distinguishes between transit versus destination host countries, exposing how sites of transit are regularly overlooked. But rather than showing that we *must* look at camps, this book strikes us as revealing that camps in the Pacific and Southeast Asia offer a crucial—but not singular—lens into how competing actors and interests shaped refugee protection.

Fourth, *In Camps* describes the complexities of Hong Kong’s camps in great depth. The book devotes approximately one-third of its space to Hong Kong, addressing the period prior to and after the critical implementation of the Comprehensive Plan of Action in 1989. Yet this level of detail may have come at the cost of other case studies. Nevertheless, we found these chapters replete with nuance; they will be of wide interest to students of international law and organizations.

In short, *In Camps* paints a rights-based approach to refugee protection in countries of transit against the backdrop of global and regional power dynamics. It invites readers to thread the legacies of war, militarism, and empire throughout the places in Asia where Vietnamese first landed. The book will be a key reference for students and scholars of Southeast Asia, forced displacement, and resettlement.

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