

INDOCHINESE REFUGEE EXPERIENCES FROM 1975 - 1983:
PRELIMINARY BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

An investigation of the experiences of Indochinese refugees was undertaken, using primarily biographical material from ten Indochinese refugees. The preliminary information presented covers four areas: experience of civil war and communist victory; the actual process of becoming a refugee; life in the refugee camps; and life in the United States. Results indicating that the experiences of the refugees varied in these areas according to the country of origin and ethnic group are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Inquiries into the experiences of Indochinese refugees have, thus far, been chiefly concerned with: 1) economics; 2) social adjustment; 3) conflicts with established communities in the United States; and 4) health issues. These investigations have been performed primarily by sociologists and social workers. This is natural because many of the most immediate concerns for refugees are social in character.

It was felt, however, that cultural and historical material more suited to anthropological investigation were being lost. This information would be most valuable to researchers and others interested in the Indochinese community. Thus, an attempt was made to collect biographical material on the Indochinese refugee experiences.

This article is a survey of the information derived from such a study carried out in 1982 and 1983 in Wichita, Kansas. It covers four main areas of the Indochinese refugee experiences: 1) the history of the communist take-over in each of the three countries involved; 2) the actual process of becoming a refugee; 3) life in the refugee camps; and 4) life in the United States.

A general thesis is that the specific experiences of Indochinese refugees differed depending upon the country of origin and the ethnic group of the individual refugee. This thesis pertains primarily to the first two areas of the

survey, the communist take-over and the process of becoming a refugee. Its impact on life in the camps and the United States is less clear from the preliminary data.

METHODS

This investigation took place primarily at the Catholic Indochinese Refugee Resettlement Program in Wichita, Kansas from January 1982 to May 1983. Information was obtained using three methods: 1) life history recording; 2) informal interviewing; and 3) participant observation. These methods were selected because they afforded greater control by the subjects rather than by the investigator. This was felt to be essential if anthropological data were to be obtained.

Life histories were recorded in an office at the Catholic Indochinese Refugee Resettlement Program. Informants were selected by the investigator on the following bases: 1) proficiency in English; 2) interest in telling their story; 3) country of origin (so that a variety would be included); and 4) ethnic group (so that as many as possible would be included). A summary of the ten persons whose life histories were recorded is contained in Table 1. A breakdown of this information is given in Table 2.

It should be noted that not all informants are included in the tables--only those for whom life histories have been recorded. Information and data are included here from informants for whom no life histories were recorded. Such information was obtained using the participant observation and informal interviewing methods.

Informal interviewing took place in English as a Second Language classrooms at the Catholic Indochinese Resettlement Program and as a volunteer teacher of ESL for Lutheran Social Service, Wichita, Kansas. It was announced to students in ESL classes at CIRRP that the author was interested in learning about Indochinese experiences.

The main role for participant observation was in an ESL class for Cambodian refugees where the author reversed roles with the students and asked to be taught the Khmer language. This permitted considerable personal interaction and generated much interest in the author's project. Also, some observation took place when the author was invited to spend the weekend with a Vietnamese family.

TABLE 1

Name*	Country**	Sex	Age***	Year Left	Arrived in U.S.
VI	Vietnam e. Chinese	M	34	1978	1979
NO	Laos	F	47	1979	1980
THO	Cambodia e. Khmer & Chinese	M	20	1975	1979
GI	e. Vietnamese b. Cambodia r. Laos	F	36	1975	1975
NGI	Vietnam	M	30	1975	1975
SO	Laos	M	43	1975	1980
PHA	Vietnam	F	31	1971	1971
ME	Cambodia	M	41	1974	1974
TI	e. Vietnamese b. Vietnam r. Laos	F	20	1975	1975
HO	Vietnam	M	40	1975	1975

*Not real names; these are coded markers.

**e = ethnic group; b = place of birth; r = place of residence

***at time of interview

TABLE 2

Breakdown of information on Table 1.

Sex: Men 6
Women 4

Ethnic Group: Vietnamese 5
Lao 2
Khmer 1
Chinese 1
Khmer & Chinese 1

Residence: Vietnam 4
Laos 4
Cambodia 2

Age: range from 20 to 47 years

The Life History Method

The life history method was chosen as the primary method for two reasons: It was a simple means of obtaining data; and the situation of the informants and the researcher's own schedule made submersion in the culture unlikely, though opportunities were sought.

L.L. Langness and Gelya Frank talk about life history as a "culture in context" approach that is "person-centered" (Langness and Frank 1981:1). It is an "insider's view" designed to understand the way that cultural patterns come together "and are linked in the life of an individual" (Ibid.). The subjectivity of this process appealed to the author, and seemed suited to the situation of fieldwork, which contained no functioning wholes to study: no community was yet formed. Biographies are also useful for discerning culture change. Clearly, the informants in this study have undergone a culture change.

The method does have some drawbacks, however. It is a merging of informant and anthropologist. The author in this study was a part of the dominant culture with all the associations of dominance and cultural hegemony involved. That is not the usual position of an anthropological researcher.

Ethnic Groups in Indochina

There are six ethnic groups traditionally living in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Two of these groups--Chinese and Vietnamese--are distributed throughout all three countries. In addition to these two groups, there are the Khmers, who are the principal ethnic group in Cambodia, and the Lao, predominating in Laos. Smaller ethnic groups are the Cham, a Muslim group of Malay background living in Cambodia, and the Hmong in Laos.

Interviews in this survey were conducted with members of the Chinese, Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese groups.

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNIST TAKE-OVER

According to the information obtained from informants in this survey, refugees from each of the three countries--Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam--experienced the communist take-over of their respective countries in distinctly different ways. This was due to several factors: 1) the manner in which the communists took control of the governments; 2) the immediate actions each communist government took to consolidate control; 3) the history of resistance (or lack

of resistance) to a communist take-over in each country; and 4) the cultural traditions of the various ethnic groups and their interaction.

Vietnam

After a long and protracted civil war which had involved several foreign powers, the communist north subdued the pro-U.S. south in April 1975 (Duiker 1981:315). The imminent communist victory precipitated a panic and fear in the city of Saigon (Ibid.). This reaction was heavily influenced by the experiences of millions of refugees who had fled to the south in the 1950's when the north became a communist state.

HO, a lawyer in Saigon, described vividly his childhood journey from the north. His father had been arrested, and later released by the communist government in the 1950's. The family's land was confiscated. HO and his family lived in the jungle for a week while they were building a raft, which they used to float down the coast to the south.

HO expressed a great fear of the communists because of this experience in his childhood. In April 1975, he managed to get into the United States Embassy in Saigon and was part of the earliest group of Vietnamese refugees to come to United States. HO acknowledged that many Vietnamese who had not lived in the north did not have the same degree of fear of the communists, but were fearful because information about life in the north was shared with those in the south during the intervening years of civil war.

There is, of course, considerable evidence of the reaction of those living in Saigon in April 1975 to the imminent communist victory from sources such as news reports. This reaction, however, was primarily limited to Saigon, because most of the surrounding areas had been under communist control for some time previous to the fall of Saigon. People outside of Saigon experienced the communist take-over differently because there was no opportunity for immediate escape. Escape and the process of becoming a refugee would only be possible for such people after the communists had consolidated their power. This was the case for VI, who was living on the outskirts of Saigon. His experience also differed because he is ethnically Chinese. His family's business was closed by the communists and VI eventually left Vietnam by boat in 1978.

NGI was a member of the South Vietnamese Navy, and was on patrol on a boat at the time Saigon fell. He and others

in the crew sailed to one of the American ships which was receiving refugees from Saigon and came to America in 1975.

Cambodia

The pro-Western government of Cambodia fell shortly after the fall of Saigon in April, 1975. There had been a civil war in Cambodia since 1971, when President Lon-Nol took over the government and declared a republic. As with Vietnam, before the actual communist take-over, much of Cambodia had been under nominal communist control. Foreign powers had some involvement in the civil war.

The communist Khmer Rouge leaders began their reign with a resettlement program. Specifically, they forced everyone out of the major cities into the countryside. There was a general feeling expressed among the Cambodian refugees that the communists were not trustworthy. One woman reported that anyone wearing glasses was killed immediately because they were assumed to be educated, and therefore "impure." THO and ME both reported cases in which persons were shot just because the local person in charge in the Khmer Rouge was "mad at them." There was definitely a feeling that the communists' actions were unpredictable and dangerous.

Every Cambodian person interviewed, including those from whom no life histories are recorded, reported that a member of their family had been killed by communists. There is every evidence that many people died in Cambodia, both from deliberate shootings and starvation. The woman who reported that those with glasses were shot, also reported that she was forced to eat the leaves off the trees, because no food was provided for her.

A French Catholic priest, Francois Ponchaud, using refugee reports, discusses the harshness of the work the people were put to after the Khmer Rouge took over, and the scarcity of food. Some people were given only three small allotments of rice per week (Ponchaud 1977:59). He also quotes unofficial French estimates of 800,000 dead by the end of 1975 (Ibid.:71).

Laos

The monarchy in Laos invited the communists to take-over the government in September 1975, after Vietnam and Cambodia became communist. Very little panic or fear was reported by informants, though thousands did escape to Thailand.

TI, a Vietnamese living in Laos, said that life there was very easy, and war seemed "far away." She lived in the capital of Laos, Vietiane. TI and SO both report that they had communist friends and co-workers, and went to school and worked with communists daily. They both said emphatically that they were not afraid of the communists. SO said: "We didn't want to fight." Lao informants generally indicated that there was not a strong military tradition in Laos.

There is no evidence of a great deal of killing or mass starvation in Laos after the communist take-over. NO, whose husband was in the military, reported that her husband was still in hiding in Laos, but was not afraid of being killed.

There is some evidence from news reports that Hmong in Laos were treated more harshly, but for Lao refugees interviewed in this survey, there were no stories of killings or imprisonment.

BECOMING A REFUGEE

In addition to differing experiences in the communist take-over in each of the three countries, the experiences of becoming a refugee and the means of escape also varied according to the country of origin for the informants included in this survey. These differences were primarily due to geography and political conflicts.

Vietnam

For Vietnamese refugees, the combination of geographical and political conditions allowed only one route of escape from the country--by boat. Walking and driving were not possibilities because of communist governments in every contiguous country. Even if a refugee could manage to avoid the governments of the neighboring countries, there was a protracted civil war in Cambodia, and Laos, though not in a severe crisis, was geographically more distant from the southern portion of Vietnam than Cambodia.

VI left by boat, as did NGI and HO. NGI also reported that his mother escaped by walking through Cambodia to a camp in Thailand, and she reported that it was a very dangerous means of escape.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, walking through a civil war was the only means of escape after 1978. Three years after the victory of the Khmer Rouge and the creation of a Democratic

Kampuchea, Vietnam invaded from the east (Etcheson 1984:193). Western Cambodia remained a Khmer Rouge stronghold (Ibid.:199).

THO reported that it was a very dangerous situation for anyone trying to escape. He escaped several years before the Vietnamese invasion, but reported that unarmed people were often ambushed and killed on the spot "like animals," THO said. ME reported that his mother was killed while trying to escape to Thailand after the Vietnamese invasion.

Laos

For those people living in Laos who wanted to escape, it was uniformly reported by the informants that it was not difficult or dangerous. There was little interference from the government and no violence was reported by the informants in this study.

TI reported that she and her family just got on a ferry and went across the Mekong River to Thailand. NO left by car. SO reported no problems in leaving Laos.

LIFE IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS

Life in the refugee camps is described by all informants as difficult. Ponchaud also describes the "abysmal conditions" of the refugee camps, in Thailand particularly (Ponchaud 1977:180). There was little food available, very crowded living conditions, and little freedom, according to informants. In Thailand, the camps were controlled by the Thai military.

THO reports that a special pass was required to leave a camp, a pass that cost money and was difficult to obtain. If you left without a pass and were caught, you were arrested, and had to pay money to just get back in the camp. THO said it was very hard to get out of the camp.

SO reported less difficulty living in the refugee camp. Though there was little food--he described the amounts as one-hundred pounds of rice per month, three pounds of meat per month, and two pounds of vegetables per month--SO said "life went on, people got married." He lived in a bamboo house, which he built for himself at the camp. SO's situation was perhaps special, because he was part of what is called the "White Lao," as opposed to the "Red Lao." The White Lao were allowed to leave the camps in order to make military incursions into Laos. SO was part of a company of fifty men who made several incursions into Laos after the communist take-over.

As far as distribution of ethnic groups throughout the camps, that was primarily determined by geography. Vietnamese were more likely to be in Malaysia, Hong Kong or the Philippines than in Thailand, which was the only place reported for Lao and Cambodian refugees. Thus, most Vietnamese reported different conditions, though some, especially those in Malaysia, reported great hardship in the camps. VI and NGI, who were in Hong Kong and Subic Bay, Philippines respectively, did not report great food shortages.

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

Informants' reflections on life in the United States also varied somewhat according to country of origin. This is most likely due to differences in urbanization in the countries of origin.

THO said that farming in Cambodia required hard work only for half of the year, whereas in the United States, one has to get a "good job and work hard for education."

Vietnamese refugees did not notice this difference, probably because of the greater emphasis on urban life in that country.

All informants claimed to have very good feelings about the United States and Americans. This was true of younger refugees especially. Older refugees were often non-committal in statements about the United States; statements like "America has no war" or "American has lots of money" were common responses. Whether or not younger refugees were more positive because of the age factor, and a fear of offending, while the older refugees were more certain of their opinions, is unclear. No one said that they were treated badly by Americans. SO mentioned that some Americans do not like refugees, and interestingly, said that he "doesn't blame them."

There was an age difference reported in the desire to return to one's homeland, with younger refugees wanting to stay in the United States, and older refugees wanting to return. Most, however, said that they would only return if the communists were driven out of power.

Only one person said he wanted to return (to Vietnam) no matter the consequences. He was very young and not one of the ten life histories included in this study, though he was an informant.

Raising Children in the United States

It was discussed with all informants how they would raise their children in America; whether they wanted them to be Americans or Khmer, Vietnamese, Lao, etc. Also, how American children differed from other children was discussed.

All informants except one, THO, said they wanted their children to be both American and the traditional culture. THO said his children would be Americans.

HO has a daughter who was born during the course of this study. Observations of the daughter were made in HO's home over a weekend stay. The daughter, who was three at the time, did not understand a single word of English and spoke only Vietnamese. HO reported that this was done on purpose, though he had said previously that he wanted to raise his children as both American and Vietnamese. The language situation of the daughter has not been subsequently investigated, but it is assumed that she has begun to speak English as she has entered American schools.

Reasons for Coming to the United States

The question as to why a refugee chose to leave his or her home and then come to the United States has many implications, not the least of which are political, since the United States Immigration Service has specific guidelines. The refugees knew that there was a right answer and a wrong answer to this question. The right answer would have been that they were anti-communists whose lives would be in peril if they returned home. The wrong answer would have been economic reasons. This was U.S. Immigration policy, the informants said, and the answers, it was reported, were widely circulated.

Nonetheless some refugees did report that they wanted to live in the United States for economic reasons. SO stated that his job was taken away from him by the communists in Laos and he was forced to teach agriculture (not his field). That made him unhappy, and also, there was no pay other than food.

VI described how the new communist government in Vietnam closed many shops of the ethnic Chinese, so that they could not make a good living. VI also mentioned discrimination against those of Chinese ancestry by the Vietnamese government as a reason for leaving. NO and GI also reported economic factors as being part of the reason for wanting to live in the United States.

Most informants, however, simply said that they did not like the communists because there was no freedom, or their family was hurt in some way. All did acknowledge, when pressed, that there was a negative economic impact on them resulting from the communist victories.

It should be noted that in the history of the United States, many immigrants came to the U.S. for economic reasons, and that the disruption of economic viability is a factor in many refugee situations.

CONCLUSION

A people's knowledge of their own history and culture is important in their identity and political power. It was felt to be important to obtain the stories of the Indochinese refugees while they were still recent memories. Given the fact that these people's cultures were disrupted, and that they had other significant survival concerns, this work may provide information to the refugees themselves that they were, at the time, unable to assemble themselves.

Anthropology has often been seen as a means of survival for cultures under stress. Lowie and Boas saw it that way, and used life history as a means of obtaining information regarding culture change.

It is hoped that the information presented in this study will be valuable to the Indochinese in choosing their identities in their changing situations in America.

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