

University of Massachusetts - Amherst

From the SelectedWorks of Joel M. Halpern

May 1991

Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in America.; The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work, and Cultural Values [Book Review]

Contact
Author

Start Your Own
SelectedWorks

Notify Me
of New Work



Available at: http://works.bepress.com/joel_halpern/54



Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in America.; The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work, and Cultural Values.

Review Author[s]:
Joel M. Halpern

The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 50, No. 2 (May, 1991), 457-458.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-9118%28199105%2950%3A2%3C457%3ARAICLA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>

The Journal of Asian Studies is currently published by Association for Asian Studies.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/afas.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in America. Edited by DAVID W. HAINES. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1989. xii, 198 pp. \$35.00.

The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work, and Cultural Values. By NATHAN CAPLAN, JOHN K. WHITMORE, and MARCELLA H. CHOY. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989. x, 248 pp. \$24.50.

David Haines has previously published several articles on Indochinese refugees in the U.S. and edited a general handbook on that subject. The Caplan volume (he is the former director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan) is actually an expansion of one of the chapters in the Haines book, but deals with the data in a more qualitative way. Both volumes deal with the results of large-scale survey research. Taken together, these works provide a good summary of survey research since 1975.

Haines gives us a good perspective on previous research, which, as he states, well deserves reexamination since much of it has been limited by the "relevance of the research to specific public policies." Linda Gordon's chapter provides a methodological perspective, while Alden Roberts and Paul Starr focus on the study of the subsequent adjustment of the first group of 1975 Vietnamese refugees. In their conclusion, they raise the question of the transition from refugee status to immigrants in the process of assimilation. Ruth Dunning concentrates on the first years of adaptation, 1975–79. Young Yun Kim deals not only with the differentiated Vietnamese arrival cohorts but with the important distinctions between the lowland Lao and the Hmong in their patterns of adaptation. In the concluding chapters, Paul Strand and Rubén Rumbaut focus on the San Diego community in its multi-ethnic dimensions. The latter contribution is notable for bringing together school achievement results with the survey data.

Readers who are not social scientists specializing in large-scale survey research may be a bit overwhelmed by the methodological detail in the surveys discussed in this volume. At the same time, the large sample size does provide us with a range of information within the groups considered. The Haines volume provides much basic statistical information on the five main groups: Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao, and Hmong. He estimates that by 1987 there were 846,000 documented arrivals plus about 200,000 children born here. If one considers the Indochinese as a single entity, they then constituted the largest Asian group in the United States. It should be stressed, however, that this grouping is a historical artifact of the colonial experience and not cultural. One of the contributors to the Haines volume, Rumbaut, provides an example of this diversity. Based on a study of a selected sample from the San Diego Indochinese community, he found child-woman ratios (the number of children under 5 per 1,000 women of childbearing age (15–44 years) to range from 511 for the Sino-Vietnamese to 1,769 for the Hmong, with the other groups in between. The national U.S. rate is 309. This author discusses some of the consequences of the projected population growth both through high fertility and continuing immigration.

While the authors of *The Boat People and Achievement in America* attempt to be precise, the term "boat people" is somewhat puzzling since the book defines them as the "hundreds of thousands of people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (who

began a flight that has become ingrained in our minds as that of the Boat People." Their survey is composed of 20 percent ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, 30 percent ethnic Lao, with the remainder Vietnamese. The first and last were, of course, boat people. The Lao, however, escaped by crossing the Mekong. They used small boats when available but sometimes crossed on logs or even by swimming. They are all, however, of the group known as the Second Wave. This differentiates them from those who exited in 1975 at the fall of Saigon or immigrants who have come more recently from Vietnam as part of the Orderly Departure Program. As might be expected, the initial 1975 group of Vietnamese is the most highly educated with the greatest proportion of professionals.

The authors of *The Boat People* are quite optimistic about the significance of their survey results. They focus particularly on the high levels of academic achievement of the children of families who reached America in the Second Wave. They do not overlook the cultural differences between the Theravada Buddhism of the Lao and the Confucian background of the Sino-Vietnamese and the Vietnamese. But they attribute the significant academic achievement of the pupils (most had arrived knowing virtually no English) to the shared strong sense of family cohesiveness and the very high value placed on education among all groups. They also note that education is also seen by the families as a potential channel of mobility. Several interviews quoted at length articulate the desire of the parents to postpone reward to the next generation and their willingness (in many households both parents are employed) to take what are essentially dead-end jobs to maintain the family. The authors conclude, "Despite personal hardship and trauma, they have endured without being irreparably scarred. We do not find overriding demoralization, lamenting of fate, and indulgence in self-pity. Instead, we find an aspiring, upbeat people who have made some rather remarkable economic and educational achievements" (p. 145). This viewpoint and experience was also part of the history of many other immigrant groups who came to the United States in the early years of this century.

Analyses of failure and conflict can be as illuminating as those of success and cooperation. Neither of these books, unfortunately, manage to combine their treatment of the positive side with evidence of negative outcomes, such as murder, mental illness, suicide, and the violent consequences of racism, all of which have impacted on the American Indochinese communities. We can't really understand the full adaptation of groups to American life without also knowing something of their experience with gangs and criminality, which served also as channels of mobility for earlier immigrant groups. There is now considerable evidence that the Indochinese are repeating these historic patterns. To date, however, most of the violence appears to be confined within the Asian community. It is well to dwell on the reasons for Asian success, but the other side deserves treatment as well.

The central place given to family in these analyses also makes one reflect on the status of other refugee groups where these supports were lacking. In this connection, one thinks of the Unaccompanied Minors Program and the overall status of Amerasians. While voluntary organizations and sponsorship by middle-class white Americans have been important, the hostile relations between the Indochinese and their neighbors in poorer neighborhoods have occasionally resulted in both arson and murder. Overall, however, these volumes provide a useful summary of data on a topic that has only recently begun to receive focused scholarly attention as the Indochinese in North America progress from refugee to ethnic group status.

JOEL M. HALPERN
University of Massachusetts