

Indochinese Refugees in America

Problems of
Adaptation and
Assimilation

Paul J. Strand
Woodrow Jones, Jr.

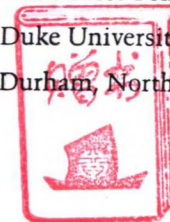
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Preface

The study that is described in this book grew out of a joint effort between the Social Science Research Laboratory (SSRL) of San Diego State University and ACCESS, a San Diego area private service provider that was contracted by the state of California to provide services to Indochinese refugees. The effort resulted in modest funding from the Regional Employment and Training Consortium for a needs assessment survey of San Diego area Indochinese refugees. The survey was conducted during the summer of 1981, the data were analyzed during the following winter, and a final report was submitted to the funding agency in March 1982.

I was encouraged by Professor Jones to pursue the study further, as the final report did not analyze all of the data that was provided by the survey. Unfortunately, the responsibility of directing a research laboratory required that new studies be given more immediate attention. A contract with Duke was not signed until 1983.

The completion of this book has depended on the efforts of many people. In the beginning, it was Lucy Lyons, Sandra Sveine, and Dr. Cuong Ngo-Anh who supervised the translation of the instrument, trained the interviewers, and supervised their fieldwork. They also assisted in the preparation of the final report. Later, Lawrence Sharp assisted Professor Jones and me in the preparation of two health-related articles, and David Mills assisted me in the preparation of an employment article.

Research for much of the background material included in the first section of the book was conducted by Jeanne Frey and Andrew

Isbell. Finally, the completion of the manuscript has depended on the exhaustive efforts of Carole Outhouse. She managed the typing and informed the authors of omissions and deletions. She and all other participants mentioned above were employed by the SSRL. Without the contribution of SSRL, the project could not have been completed.

We hope the information provided in the following pages will assist those involved in the resettlement of Indochinese refugees so that the exigency of their resettlement can be managed. The San Diego area refugee community was very cooperative in this study and the experience of dealing with them enlightening. Their situation deserves attention.

Paul J. Strand
Woodrow Jones, Jr.

I Immigrants, Refugees, and Resettlement

During the first half of the twentieth century mass population movements tended to be *voluntary* migrations. During the second half, *involuntary* migrations became a significant factor in these movements. Modern refugee movements have given rise to a new class of people who are homeless and stateless and who live in a condition of constant stress and insecurity. The problems of reception, administration, and resettlement of these refugees have taxed and overloaded governmental institutions, and created many other political and socioeconomic problems for host societies.

Although refugees were once considered a temporary phenomenon, their increasing numbers have required governments, private agencies, and other international organizations to cooperate in finding solutions to what is now seen as an ongoing problem. Several national governments have already created permanent agencies to coordinate resettlement activities. In the United States, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) was created by the Refugee Act of 1980. The discussions that led to the passage of this act reflected a growing recognition that the focus of United States immigration policy cannot be restricted to the problems that occur along the United States-Mexico border. The diversity of transnational population movements requires new policies that are effective in coordinating the resettlement of many different groups of immigrants.

The chapters in this book focus on the context and experiences of Indochinese refugees who resettled in the United States after the Vietnam War. The United States has taken a large share of the respon-

sibility of resettling refugees who were forced to migrate due to the fall of the government of South Vietnam and the subsequent actions of the new government. In the following pages we examine the policies and experiences of resettling these refugees and evaluate their adaptation to American society.

These refugees are not typical of most other immigrants to the United States. They have dissimilar cultures, experiences, and expectations. Furthermore, their migration is neither voluntary nor economic. It is forced by a fear of retaliation and repression. Their numbers and their conditions upon arrival are certain to strain the adaptability of American society. Our examination is aimed at the problems of adaptation in one resettlement site.

The Conditions of Refugee Migration

Before examining the details of Indochinese migration, it may be useful to examine the general conditions of refugee migration. Traditionally, migrants are viewed as people in a social unit who decide to solve problems through mobility.¹ The decision to migrate implies a degree of blockage in the pursuit of social and economic goals. Migrants must feel that some needs or desires are not being adequately fulfilled in their present location. These feelings are always relative: they require the *perception* of inadequate means of acquiring satisfaction of wants and needs.²

Certainly, this definition of transnational migration and immigration assumes the freedom of choice in the migration decision. In the context of political upheaval, refugee migrations have been considered a special category of transnational migrations. The political refugee relocates because of the threats of political persecution. The relocation is largely involuntary.³ The term "forced migration" has been used as a description of this special class of migrants. In conditions of forced migration, migrants do not retain any "power to decide whether or not to leave."⁴ "It is the reluctance to uproot oneself, and the absence of positive motivations to settle elsewhere, which characterize all refugee decisions and distinguish this refugee from the voluntary migrant."⁵

The characteristics of forced migration present problems for host societies. These population movements have been noted as being rapid and without adequate preparation.⁶ Often the host society and

the migrant population do not have the resources necessary for successful resettlement. Basic resources such as money and the acquisition of language and employment skills become the burden of the international community. Furthermore, forced migrations are often connected with a controlling government which directs their movement and exodus for political reasons. Upon arrival, social and cultural differences between the migrants and host societies play a critical role in shaping the migrants' resettlement experiences. Deep-seated mistrust and fear of authority are impediments to adapting to the new environment.

In sum, forced migration is different from any other government-influenced migration. The voluntary political refugee sees the migration as a means of escaping political oppression and the establishment of a new way of life. The forced migrants, on the other hand, have an orientation toward the retention of the past and not a reorientation toward the new. These refugees lack the motivation to migrate and, since their movement is not voluntary, they experience a sense of powerlessness which hampers their assimilation into a new society.

Global Responses to Forced Migration

The pattern of forced migration has been toward the western hemisphere, with refugees more likely to concentrate in the industrialized countries of Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. Since government policies vary as to the definition of a refugee, many refugees do not attain an actual refugee status and are, at best, considered quasi-refugees. This situation is complicated by refugee perceptions that international assistance will make the possibility of resettlement in an industrialized nation a reality.

The definitional problems of refugee status prevent recognition of the true nature of the migration. For instance, most liberal nations require the presence of "barriers to exit" for the designation of a political refugee. The increasing number of arrivals from the People's Republic of China in Hong Kong has resulted in "the paradoxical spectacle of a free country demanding of a totalitarian one to impose more effective barriers."⁷ By foreclosing to them the alternative of voting with their feet, liberal countries, in effect, contribute to the maintenance of authoritarian regimes.

The United Nations has played a key role in defining the problems of refugees and in developing cooperative strategies for resettling displaced populations. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), established by the United Nations in 1951, is the major agency for working with refugees. The original mission of UNHCR was to protect refugees from the crisis and aftermath of World War II. Since then, it has become a major actor in coordinating international funds for refugee assistance. However, the present large flow of refugees has led to the development of doubts about the capacity of the international community to respond to the problems of forced migrations.⁸

The limitations in the United Nations' effort have been the lack of adequate international funds to meet the demands of rapid migration and the identification of national funds for finding a permanent solution to a refugee crisis. The UNHCR primarily contracts with other agencies to carry out its mandate. Although its budget has grown exponentially during the last thirty years, this growth has not matched the needs of the growing refugee population. Other agencies such as UNICEF, the International Commission on Migration (ICM), and various regional bodies provide supplemental support for refugee assistance. Most international support is geared toward the medical needs of the refugees while general resettlement support remains the responsibility of the nation of final asylum.

International relief funding comes mainly from the governments of the industrialized nations. Since the refugee crisis has international political consequences, most governments prefer to offer funding through multinational organizations. Thus, the UNHCR receives most of its funds from the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, Japan, France, and Canada.

There are a number of private relief organizations that supplement the international apparatus for the assisting of refugees. The Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, Catholic groups, and other missionary groups in Third World countries provide much of the manpower and aid for the resettlement of refugees. These religious organizations are supplemented by private secular voluntary agencies such as the League of Red Cross Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Their efforts, unlike those of governments, have focused on the long-term effect of migration on the refugee and the society of asylum.

Government relief funds have focused on two aspects of the international refugee crisis. First, they have focused on the impact that a massive influx of refugees has on Third World countries. These nations often become sites of temporary asylum where care and sheltering of the refugee is dependent upon funds from international relief agencies. Second, government relief funds have focused on the permanent resettlement of refugees. The country of permanent asylum has the responsibility for providing the refugee with temporary assistance in order to ease the pain of migration. Thus, government relief assistance has been geared toward short-term assistance but not long-term resettlement aid.

In summation, the international apparatus for the assistance of refugees involves three sets of institutions working simultaneously to provide a solution to the crisis created by forced migration. Governments direct their efforts toward immigration policy and short-range solutions to enable permanent asylum. Voluntary agencies provide assistance for both temporary and long-term resettlement needs. And international relief agencies provide the international funding and coordination of relief assistance.

Indochinese and International Migration

As the following chapter indicates, the Indochinese migration meets all the requirements of a forced migration. The rapid movement of Vietnamese during the fall of Saigon and the later flights by sea were involuntary. In addition, fears of reprisal as well as intense shelling "pushed" many Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong migrants across their borders into Thailand. Temporary refugee camps were established along these borders and in other Asian nations to respond to the immediate needs of these new migrants.

The world community responded with hesitancy toward the possibility of resettling such a large number of refugees. Despite the worldwide attention given to incidents in which "boat people" were being turned back to sea, only a few countries were willing to accept appreciable numbers of these refugees for resettlement. By the end of 1979 there were more than 14,000 land refugees in thirteen camps in Thailand and more than 75,000 boat refugees in one Malaysia camp. Malaysia saw these refugees, many of whom were ethnic Chinese, as disrupting the delicate Malay-Chinese racial balance. Thailand

viewed the refugees as upsetting the delicate political balance between the new governments of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.⁹

Other nations expressed similar political concerns about the possibility of resettling a large number of refugees. Indonesian officials expressed concern about the impact of overcrowding on its social problems. Hong Kong officials voiced strong opposition to the influx of more refugees, given the number of refugees coming from the People's Republic of China. Similar doubts were expressed by a number of countries, including those offering first asylum.¹⁰

In an effort to attain worldwide participation in the resettlement effort, the UNHCR coordinated several conferences to solicit the support of industrialized nations. It also provided financing for the temporary care of refugees. The asylum country governments and voluntary agencies were responsible for providing the organization for the delivery of aid. Unfortunately, worldwide support for this effort has been lacking, and criticism of the ineptness of first asylum countries in providing for basic necessities in refugee camps has mounted.

As table 1.1 indicates, the patterns of resettlement of Indochinese refugees have generally reflected the dominant actors in Indochina's history, with the United States and France assuming the bulk of responsibility. The long history of French involvement and the recent history of American involvement appear to be important factors in their willingness to accept these large numbers. Other nations, such as Australia and Canada, were motivated by humanitarian concern, as well as pressure from Western allies.

Overall, departures to the United States represent over half of the Indochinese departures from countries of first asylum. Still there are estimates of over 300,000 refugees in camps awaiting immigration and resettlement in countries of permanent asylum. With the possibility of more refugees, many Western nations have developed national refugee policies to meet this contingency and to meet the needs of countries which are now sites of temporary asylum.

Policy Issues Underlying Refugees and Resettlement

The burden of support for the immigration and resettlement of Indochinese refugees has had a disproportionate impact on the host society. Social problems have been numerous but have generally been

surmounted through the coordination of immigration and social welfare policies. However, four major social problems have had recurring effects on the nature of the resettlement experience of involuntary refugees.

First, the size of the flow of all types of refugees is not currently controllable, and therefore does not allow for an orderly transition into the country of permanent asylum. Many have argued that immigration policies that inhibit mass migration are necessary to protect social structures from the shock effects of involuntary migration.¹¹ In the case of the Indochinese refugees, there has been mounting internal criticism of the United States' ability to maintain high admission programs for this group given the large number of refugees from other areas such as Africa.¹² Questions regarding migrant workers and undocumented aliens further complicate this issue. The magnitude of the social strain that lies ahead is not addressed by current U.S. refugee policy.

Second, social criticism has mounted over the allocation of societal resources to these refugees, and over their refugee classification. It has been suggested that a large proportion of these refugees have been motivated by "pull" factors such as economic betterment rather than "push" factors such as political persecution. For example, many of the refugees who have recently arrived in the United States have had little contact with the United States' efforts in the Vietnam War. In addition, upon arrival, many of these refugees have been accused of abusing social welfare services and exploiting social programs. This is especially bothersome given the high cost of resettling refugees in a period when many such social programs are being reduced.

Third, the level of support for the resettlement of these refugees has set a precedent for future refugees. Criticism within the United States has been directed at this level of support and the burden it has placed on state governments. Some states have borne an unfair burden in becoming prime sites for resettlement of large refugee populations. With other nations reducing their refugee flows, the United States is absorbing larger proportions of recent refugees. These recent arrivals tend to resettle in established sites due to family connections and the presence of a developed resettlement infrastructure. Thus, states with large enclaves of refugees are now experiencing population growths which place further burdens on social welfare programs.

Finally, there is concern over the effectiveness of resettlement

Table 1.1 Indochinese
refugee activity
April 1975
through
June 1981

Countries of asylum/RPC's	Total additions since 1975	Total reductions since April 1975					
	Arrivals	Other	To U.S.	3rd countries	Voluntary repatriation	Other	RPC's
Hong Kong	101,569	891	39,752	43,035	0	146	4,674
Macau	7,099	57	1,915	2,328	0	549	788
Indonesia	66,218	33	37,626	22,974	0	4	106
Japan	4,999	19	2,414	972	0	0	0
Malaysia	158,748	109	78,649	60,677	0	9	4,000
Philippines	21,524	16	7,909	5,463	0	3	2,929
Singapore	23,832	2	4,363	13,845	1	0	2,177
Thailand	62,590	0	21,853	14,779	0	0	11,852
Other	31,472	5	2,632	28,434	0	0	0
Total boat	478,051	1,132	197,113	192,507	1	711	26,526
Thailand-Khmer	211,648	0	29,891	33,281	0	0	18,561
Thailand-Hmong	123,267	0	47,790	19,469	18	0	77
Thailand-Lao	145,000 ^a	0	61,737	26,729	245		11,469
Thailand-Vietnamese	21,370 ^b	0	7,013	8,709	0	0	3,381
Total land	501,285	0	146,431	88,188	263	0	33,515
Orderly Departure Program	3,230	0	2,341	875	0	14	0
Vietnam to U.S. in 1975	124,547	0	123,000	0	1,547 ^c	0	0
Vietnam to China in 1975	263,000	0	0	263,000	0	0	0
Total direct	390,777	0	125,341	263,875	1,547 ^c	14	0
Bataan-RPC	44,556	440	27,200	637	0	11	
Galang-RPC	15,677	115	7,821	972	0	2	82
Total RPC's	60,233	555	35,021	1,609	0	13	82
Grand total	1,370,113	1,687	503,906	546,179	1,811	724	60,137

a. Thai Ministry of Interior census at Nong Khai camp reduced its population by 1,022 Lao refugees who had left camp earlier, but who had not been removed from camp rolls. Actually about 1,600 new Lao refugees entered the UNHCR/MOI camp system during June 1981 and are destined for the Nakhom Phanom holding center.

b. This is a UNHCR mathematically derived figure. No land Vietnamese have been permitted to enter camp NW-9 on the Thai-Kampuchean border for the

last two months. These are the UNHCR's revised estimates on the total number of land Vietnamese refugees in camp and increased its total number of land Vietnamese already in the centers by 2,378.

c. All returned from Guam in 1975 on ship (*Thuong Tin I*) to Vietnam; several dozens have since fled Vietnam by boat beginning in early 1979.

Note: RPC arrivals are not included in the arrival grand total because it would result in double addition. Departures to RPC's are not subtracted across grand total line because it would result in double subtraction.

Source: U.S., House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, *Refugee Admission Proposal*, Hearing, 97th Cong., 1st Sess., 29 September 1981 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1981), 112.

programs. The conceptualization and implementation of resettlement programs vary from nation to nation. And, within the United States there is variation from state to state regarding how programs should be designed and implemented to attain the goals of assimilation and self-sufficiency. These issues are compounded by the role conflicts between state and local authorities and voluntary agencies. Furthermore, there are many other issues, including the racial, social, and physiological stresses that affect the refugee population. These stresses are factors in the refugees' ability to assimilate and adapt to American life.

Conclusion

The problems associated with the involuntary migration and adaptation of Indochinese refugees is the focal point of this book. The book examines the experiences of this group of involuntary migrants and gives an overview of the key issues and problems underlying U.S. resettlement policies. Compared with other fields in the study of international movements, the field of refugee resettlement is only recently emerging. Thus, this study should further our knowledge of the consequences of immigration policies toward refugees. It will also provide a detailed analysis of the social adjustment of Indochinese refugees in one American community.

The historical pattern of resettlement in the United States has been established by the experiences of European immigrants who arrived at the turn of the century. First the immigrant population adapts economically but not socially. With time, a slow process of acculturation and adaptation is accomplished through education.¹³ But this pattern of assimilation has not as accurately characterized Asian ethnic groups or involuntary migrants. These migrants have special problems in accepting and adapting to a society they do not prefer. This book provides much-needed information on the adjustment of these refugees to American culture.

This book is divided into three sections. The first section provides a synthesis of information on the backgrounds of these refugees and on government policies and programs that have been designed to alleviate resettlement barriers. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the policy setting in which all local policy makers operate and through which the refugees must assimilate.

The second section of the book examines Indochinese refugees as individuals who face resettlement problems related to day-to-day living, language, health, and employment. The examination is unique in that it covers the differential impacts of resettlement on each refugee ethnic group. The context for the examination is a large refugee community in southern California.

The final section of the book offers an assessment and policy recommendations. The set of policy recommendations offered in the last chapter of the book is based on previous analysis and on this examination of the experiences of these refugees. We hope that this effort will assist in providing the empirical and analytical resources necessary to implement policies that will ease the pain of this resettlement and the resettlement of other groups of refugees which are almost certain to seek asylum in the future.

2 Prearrival Experiences

Since the fall of Saigon over 600,000 Indochinese refugees have entered the United States. These refugees, from five major ethnic groups, represent a new kind of migrant population. They include Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, ethnic Lao and Hmong from Laos, and Khmer from Cambodia. All of them come from cultures very different from that of the earlier, predominantly European immigrant. Many of them have spent years as displaced persons within their own countries, their traditional ways of life altered by the effects of devastating wars and aid-dependent economies. This chapter describes the traditional cultural backgrounds of these refugees, the historical and political events that led to the collapse of U.S.-supported regimes in this area, and their subsequent flight and resettlement in the United States and other countries.

The countries that constitute former French Indochina present a diversity of ethnic groups and cultural traditions. The ethnic Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese are dominant politically and economically in their respective countries. These lowland delta peoples have a long tradition of state-level political organization and contact with the "Great Traditions" of India and China. There are also many hill tribes such as the Hmong. These are primarily slash and burn, or swidden, farmers with village-level political organization. Finally, Southeast Asia, in particular Vietnam, is also home to the largest overseas population of ethnic Chinese, with nearly five-sixths of the total overseas Chinese population.¹

Geography plays a major role in the diversity of these groups.

The most important geographic feature is the separation of highlands from lowlands. An extension of the Himalayas, the Indo-Malayan mountain chain, curves through the Indochinese peninsula and separates the Tonkin Delta region of northern Vietnam from the Mekong Delta, the plains of Cambodia, and the lowlands of southern Laos. This also marks a major cultural separation. North Vietnam has been within the Chinese sphere of influence for over two thousand years and was a Chinese province for much of that time. The southern areas, on the other hand, have been influenced by contact with India. These distinctive cultural influences have resulted in very different social structures and world views.

The lowlands, fed by the Mekong River in the south and the Song-Koi (Red River) in the north, have provided a fertile environment for rice farming. Rice is by far the most important economic resource and commodity in this region. Prior to the escalation of the war in the mid-1960s, over 80 percent of the population in these areas were rural farmers. Much of the retail activities, and nearly all the rice trade, was controlled by the Chinese.

The highland people are mainly swidden farmers. They generally have little or no political organization more complex than the village. The ruggedness of the mountains and the poor navigability of the Mekong and Song-Koi rivers have contributed to the isolation and diversity of the ethnic groups that populate the highlands. Laos has over fifty of these groups, with the lowland ethnic Lao forming less than half the population. Hill tribes are generally regarded by the lowland peoples as backward and ignorant. In Laos, the former Royal Lao Government did little to incorporate these tribes into the political process. The Pathet Lao were the first to make a concerted effort to secure their support.

The Lao and Laos

There is great respect for age and authority among the Lao. Property is equally divided among sons and daughters. This tendency toward wide dispersion of property within a few generations is compensated for by preferential second cousin marriage, restricting the set of kinsmen.² Individuals are seen as being inextricably imbedded in a web of relationships that center on the family and community. Ethnic diversity, lack of development, and rugged terrain have impeded the

development of a sense of national identity. Most Lao lack a sense of themselves as members of a Lao nation, as the village is probably the largest social and political unit to which one's sense of belonging and loyalty extends.

The Lao culture is dominated by the traditions and ideology of Buddhism, a religion that is also responsible for the formal education of young Lao and Khmer males. Buddhism begins with the notion of worldly impermanence. All things are composed of different elements, and everything is in a constant state of flux. Since all things are constituent and constantly changing, the ego, or individual self, has no real existence. Ignorance of the true state of the world leads to desires for permanence, material things, and attachments to people. Desires or cravings result in sorrow, or *dukkha*, which can only be alleviated by following the Eightfold Path, living a moderate life of discipline, moral conduct, concentration, and meditation.

Although there is no individual self in Buddhism, there is a soul which transmigrates. One continues to be reborn until Nirvana, a state of nonego, is attained. The cycle of rebirth can be affected by one's actions, positive or negative. This law of karma is a kind of cosmic accounting, the effects of one's actions extending into the future. Ritualized "acts of merit" are possible, to counter the effects of negative karma and to accumulate good karma for the future.

Popular religious practice also includes a great many animist beliefs. Though ultimate causation is attributed to the principle of karma, many events are blamed on an assortment of spirits, ghosts, and demons. There also exist ritual specialists in these groups with no connection to Buddhism.

In terms of its political boundaries, Laos is a creation of the French. Its borders were established by several treaties that used the Mekong River to separate it from Thailand.³ These treaties left the ethnic Lao forming less than half the population of Laos, with considerably more Lao residing in Thailand.⁴ Nevertheless, ethnic Lao are the political and economic élite of Laos.

The primary economic activity in Laos is wet-rice agriculture. More than 80 percent of Laos is rural subsistence agricultural villages. All productive property and family labor is collectively owned and used by the household, under the supervision of the family head, usually the senior male. There is usually a sexual division of labor in Laos, men doing most of the heavy agricultural labor and hunting,

women being responsible for domestic tasks. Economic development in Laos has been minimal. The French, who occupied Laos for so many years, invested very little in terms of personnel, transportation facilities, education, or health care.⁵

The Japanese occupied Laos during World War II. Following their defeat, Laotian independence was declared by Prince Phetserath. This lasted only a short time, as the French reoccupied Laos in 1946. It was not until 1953 that the Geneva accords established Laotian independence under the Royal Lao government. However, a 1949 split in the party that formed the exiled post-World War II government resulted in the creation of the Progressive Peoples Organization, forerunner of the Pathet Lao and ally of the Viet Minh. By the time the Royal Lao government came to power in 1953, the Pathet Lao had gained control of over half of the Lao countryside.

The Geneva Conference recognized the importance of the Pathet Lao, giving them two northeastern provinces as "regroupment zones." It also recognized the need for the integration of the Pathet Lao with the Royal Lao government, but did not specify how this was to be accomplished.

The first such effort began in 1956. This effort gave Pathet Lao members several government posts, and the two northeastern provinces were turned over to the Royal Lao government (although the Pathet Lao retained most administrative functions). Concern in the United States about the influence of the Pathet Lao led to a suspension of U.S. aid in 1958, forcing the collapse of the coalition government, the rise to power of rightist factions, and increased conflict.

U.S. perceptions of the military threat posed by the Pathet Lao resulted in greatly increased military aid under the guise of a civilian Program Evaluations Office. This response indicated inexperience with the type of guerrilla warfare the Royal Lao government was facing.⁶ The Royal Lao Army was transformed into a miniature model of U.S. conventional forces, with the United States providing the entire military budget. Little attention was paid to counter guerrilla tactics, and the army was made up of lowland Lao exclusively. In contrast, the Pathet Lao were based in the villages, had made a concentrated effort to involve ethnic minorities, and provided superior organization and administration.

Following the collapse of the coalition government in 1958, there was escalation of the guerrilla war and the increasing involvement of

the North Vietnamese. Laos became of major strategic importance to the North Vietnamese as a supply line to their forces in South Vietnam. This supply line, the Ho Chi Minh trail, ran the length of eastern Laos, through rugged mountains, continuing down into Cambodia.

A new agreement, signed in Geneva in 1962, provided for the neutrality of Laos and again attempted to establish a coalition government. 1962 also marked the beginning of the secret war in Laos, the CIA creating a Hmong counter guerrilla force based in the high mountains around the Plain of Jars. Again the coalition failed. A rightist coup in 1964 forced the Pathet Lao back into the jungles.

A massive escalation of the U.S. presence in Indochina also began in 1964. Bombing raids against the Ho Chi Minh trail increased to more than 12,500 a month. The Plain of Jars was virtually depopulated, and 150,000 people were displaced. By 1970, two-thirds of Laos had been bombed. The bombing created more than 600,000 refugees, over 20 percent of the total population of Laos. The refugee flow increased at a rate faster than they could be resettled.⁷ By 1973 the United States was providing food for 378,000 of these refugees.⁸

Another attempt at a coalition government was made, following a 1973 ceasefire, in 1974. By 1975 this coalition also began to collapse. Rightists in the government provoked a Pathet Lao military reaction by moving Vang Pao's Hmong troops into a region of unrest and by devaluing the Lao currency. The Pathet Lao were better organized politically, and moved to consolidate their position. By 23 May 1975, four out of five rightist government ministers and a number of military leaders resigned and fled the country, as did many other wealthy Lao residents, including large numbers of Vietnamese and Chinese merchants.⁹

Hmong

The Hmong are representative of the tribal hill peoples of Southeast Asia. They have gained particular recognition for their role as guerrilla fighters in Laos, operating with U.S. clandestine support from bases in the mountains surrounding the strategic Plain of Jars.¹⁰ They have a high degree of ethnic identity and political and social solidarity.¹¹ There are perhaps as many as three million Hmong distributed across southern China and the mountainous northern

regions of Southeast Asia, of which 300,000–400,000 are in Laos, where they constitute 10 percent of the population. They prefer to live above 3,000 feet elevation, and are highly migratory.¹² In 1959 there were an estimated 45,000 living in the area around the Plain of Jars.¹³ This group, due to their long involvement with the U.S. war in Laos against the Pathet Lao, have become a target of persecution by the Pathet Lao following their takeover in 1975.

Hmong are slash and burn farmers. The importance of opium poppy cultivation as a cash crop leads to rapid soil depletion. The depletion of their soil forces the Hmong to migrate in search of new land to cultivate. This migratory cycle usually occurs in ten-year intervals. The cultivation and sale of opium has affected the productive relations of the Hmong and made them wealthier than most other hill tribes.¹⁴ It has also kept them more involved in political events and tied them economically to a cash-based market economy.

Hmong are patrilineal, having corporate lineages and clan-level organization. These provide kinship links which facilitate the movement to new areas. Although the lineage does have ritual significance, the main social linkages are those between brothers and their families and their fathers' brothers and their families. The household is the basic social and productive unit. These are generally nuclear or stem families, though large extended families are also common.

The Hmong are divided into a number of clans. Clans differ primarily in certain ritual practices, and are "essentially religious associations conferring rights of community upon their members through the spiritual bonds between them."¹⁵ The characteristic style and color of a Hmong woman's dress is used to distinguish one clan from another (although other characteristics may be used as well).

Clans recruit new members principally through the bringing in of women, as wives, from other clans. Their children will be members of the father's clan, the males retaining membership in the same clan throughout their lives, the females leaving to become members of their husband's clan upon marriage. If a woman leaves her husband's clan, either because of his death or in cases of divorce, the clan is entitled to compensation for the loss.

Clans are widely dispersed, do not come together in assembly, and lack political organization. They aid in migration by providing

ties to individuals in other areas and by acting as mutual aid associations. Most important locally are the unnamed subclans, which are distinguished by certain differences in ritual practices. Subclans may actively invite other subclan members to resettle, providing them with land whenever possible.

The household is the primary social and economic unit. Subsistence productive property is held in common, under the control of the household head, who is usually the senior male. Respect for age is emphasized and personal leadership qualities are important. Productive property and labor concerned with cash cropping are separate, the family of each married son controlling its own wealth. This may lead to internal conflicts over the allocation of resources.¹⁶ Households are subject to frequent splitting, one married son or brother taking his family and resettling in a new area. Often he will encourage other household members to resettle in this same area where they will form new separate households. The separation of cash activities from subsistence activities allows each family a measure of independence which eases the process of migration and resettlement.¹⁷

The village is the largest political unit for the Hmong. Leadership is provided by the headman, who is usually a member of the dominant clan in the village. He is selected by consensus, on the basis of individual qualities and ability. Most of his duties consist of arbitration of village disputes. In these he must promote consensus and act as the spokesman for the community. He also is the village representative to the larger political community.

In 1961 the U.S. Army Special Forces began to equip and train a force of about nine thousand Hmong under the guise of the White Star Mobile Training Teams.¹⁸ In addition, nearly one hundred Thai advisors were stationed with the Hmong. For the Hmong, the war was a conflict that involved rival clans. The CIA-backed forces were loyal to Touby Lyfong, a member of the Lv clan and an important Hmong leader. Faydang, a leader of the rival Lo clan, allied himself with the Pathet Lao after losing a leadership battle to Lyfong.

The clans loyal to Lyfong were commanded by Vang Pao, who had begun his fight against the Viet Minh in 1945 with the Free French Forces. The Hmong counter guerrillas proved very effective, using tactics similar to those of the Pathet Lao. Following the collapse of the coalition government in 1975, the Pathet Lao began a

genocidal campaign against the Hmong. In May 1975 the official Pathet Lao newspaper announced that the "Meo (Hmong) must be exterminated."¹⁹ By 1978 it was estimated that nearly 10 percent of the Hmong had been killed. In the wake of this effort, many of the Hmong fled to Thailand.

As of late February 1983 there were 76,000 refugees from Laos in Thai camps. Nearly three-quarters of these were highland tribal people, predominantly Hmong. The first wave of refugees came following the Pathet Lao victory in 1975. A second wave came in 1979. Lao refugees constituted 47 percent of Thailand's total refugee population. Many had been resettled by 1981 when Thailand introduced a "human deterrence" policy that banned the resettlement of lowland Lao. The policy was later expanded to include Vietnamese and highland tribal people as well.

The Khmer

The Khmer are members of the Mon-Khmer language family, whereas the Lao are Thai speakers of the Sino-Tibetan language family. The Khmer are a majority group, constituting about 85 percent of the population of Cambodia, with ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese constituting over 10 percent. In many other respects, the Lao and Khmer are members of a general Theravada Buddhist lowland culture. They have similar kinship systems, animist beliefs, modes of production, and world view.

The Khmer state was one of the great civilizations of Southeast Asia, centered in the royal city of Angkor. This empire lasted from 802 to 1432 A.D. before collapsing into a state of vassalage to both the Vietnamese kingdom in Cochinchina and the Siamese. It remained a vassal state until the French, claiming the Vietnamese rights in Cambodia as part of its prerogatives as a colonial power in Cochinchina, took control of the area in 1863. As in Laos, the French ruled indirectly, utilizing native authority wherever possible. French colonial rule did not go unchallenged. There was a serious rebellion in 1866-67, led by Pon Kombo and tacitly supported by the king, which required as many as 10,000 French troops to restore order. In 1916 as many as 100,000 peasants demonstrated against the French in Phnom Penh.²⁰

The ancient Khmer kingdom was a theocratic state and the

former king, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, is still seen by many of the Khmer as a god-king. Much of Sihanouk's popularity among the peasants and his ability to continue to survive as a viable political actor rest upon this aura of religiously sanctioned power, part of the long historical and cultural tradition of the area.²¹ This has enabled Sihanouk to survive a number of unlikely political alliances, such as the present tripartite resistance government opposing the Vietnamese-backed government of Heng Samrin.

Sihanouk, as King of Cambodia, declared Cambodian independence in March 1944. Son Ngoc Thanh, a conservative who was to play a continuing rôle in opposing Sihanouk, was named Minister of Foreign Affairs. Thanh attempted a coup and assumed the premiership. He was arrested by French and British authorities and exiled.

In 1946 Cambodia was declared an autonomous state within the French Union. This was independence in name only, as French advisors remained and the approval of the French Commissioner was required for all laws and regulations. In 1947 Prince Yutevong wrote a constitution modeled directly on the French Republic and formed the Democratic Party, composed primarily of the urban élite, who were rightist-monarchists.

Sihanouk dissolved the national assembly in 1949 and formed a new government in 1951 which he again dissolved in 1952, naming himself prime minister of the new government. Thanh had returned from exile in 1952 to oppose Sihanouk, and was again exiled. Thanh returned again in 1955 as the Democratic Party candidate. Sihanouk, moving to counter the influence of the Democratic Party, abdicated and formed the People's Socialist Community, a mass-based political movement. He won the elections and retained the prime minister-ship. Thanh was exiled to South Vietnam where he formed a CIA-backed rightist guerrilla army.

The attempt by Sihanouk to maintain Cambodian neutrality and to preserve his own political position from attacks by both the left and the right proved impossible in the long run, given the increasing intensity of the war in Vietnam and U.S. pressure. During the elections of 1962-63 the secret police arrested hundreds of intellectuals, forcing some into the jungles where they began to develop the infrastructure of the Khmer Rouge resistance movement.

In 1963 Sihanouk nationalized the import/export trade and the banks, and began to refuse U.S. aid. The economy began to worsen

and Sihanouk was forced to rely increasingly on Russian and Chinese aid. He also increased ties with the Viet Minh and National Liberation Front (NLF), allowing them free use of Cambodia for passage of men and materials, and as a sanctuary. Informal agreements with the NLF and the North Vietnamese were concluded in 1965, and formal recognition was granted to the Provisional Revolutionary Government in 1969. In response, the United States increased its border incursions and began intensive bombing of the eastern provinces. The United States also began defoliation of the countryside. In May 1969 the United States defoliated nearly 40,000 acres of Cambodian rubber trees, one-third of its total.²²

In March 1970, with the approval of the United States, General Lon Nol and a group of rightists seized power in Cambodia. The Lon Nol government immediately broke off relations with the North Vietnamese, Viet Minh, and Provisional Revolutionary Government. The United States was given a free hand in Cambodia, and greatly intensified its activities. Between 1970 and 1975 the United States dropped half a million tons of bombs on heavily populated areas, creating over 3 million refugees.²³ The population of Phnom Penh tripled as refugees fled the destruction. By 1975 it had grown to over three million people.

The Lon Nol government was a repressive one, and public protest grew increasingly violent. This allowed the Khmer Rouge to greatly extend their control of the countryside. Sihanouk formed the Khmer National Unified Front and supported armed insurrection against Lon Nol. Prior to their victory, and after a purge of Sihanouk supporters, the Khmer Rouge controlled 80 percent of Cambodia. The fall of the Lon Nol government came rapidly. On 17 April 1975 the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh.

The repressive government of Lon Nol was replaced by a reign of terror that shocked the world when details finally surfaced. Driven by a fanatical distrust of the cities and the belief in the impossibility of reforming the élite, intellectuals, and anyone associated with the former regime, the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot murdered millions of people. Within several days they had evacuated all urban areas, including the 3 million residents of Phnom Penh. The population was relocated to the countryside where they were immediately put to work. Many died during the relocation or in the famine that followed. Between September and December 1975 a second forced relocation

led to the deaths of many more Khmer, who could not survive the effects of famine, lack of medical care, and malaria.²⁴ Many intellectuals and government officials fled. More than 150,000 entered Vietnam, and more than 33,000 entered Thailand.

In 1978 Vietnam, now under the control of the Communists, invaded Cambodia, replacing the Pol Pot government with a puppet government under Heng Samrin. An additional 100,000 Cambodians, fearing the traditional animosity between the Vietnamese and Khmer, fled to Thailand. A third wave, driven by continuing famine and Vietnamese offensives, formed refugee camps, in the face of resistance, along the Thai-Cambodian border. This third wave numbered nearly 500,000. International relief efforts, better rice harvests, and the stability of the Samrin government led to a decrease in this flow of refugees. Close to 300,000 remain in Thailand and along the border areas, 94,000 in Thai holding centers, and 200,000 in border camps under the control of the three Cambodian resistance factions. These three have formed a coalition resistance government.²⁵

There are also about 30,000 Cambodian refugees, most of them ethnic Chinese, in Vietnam.²⁶ Some 14,000 of these are living in camps set up with the help of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Another 10,000 are in Saigon.

Despite a locally high tax rate, the French invested little in Cambodia's economic development. French neglect in Cambodia is illustrated by the fact that, by 1939, only four Cambodians had graduated from senior high school. By 1941 there were only 537 secondary school students out of a population of nearly three million people. Cambodia also has had one of the highest infant mortality rates and highest rates of illiteracy in Southeast Asia.²⁷

Cambodia, more so than Laos or Vietnam, has been primarily a nation of small independent landowner farmers. However, by 1930, over half the land was owned by the wealthiest 20 percent of farmers. By 1950, four-fifths of the peasants owned only enough land to achieve minimal subsistence levels of production.²⁸ By 1970, 20 percent of the farmers were tenants. Due to high interest rates, 75 percent of the peasants were in serious debt by 1952. In addition, the rural economy was fragmented, composed mostly of autonomous village households with no communal lands or community organizations.

The general character of social and political interaction is

strongly conditioned by Buddhist moral and ethical teachings which stress respect, a lack of argumentativeness and willingness to compromise, consensus, and a social face of serenity and passivity. The teachings also discourage the conspicuous accumulation of wealth, power, or prestige.²⁹

Vietnamese

Vietnam was more developed by the French than either Laos or Cambodia. The French introduced rubber plantations in the south, over 90 percent of which were French-owned. The plantations used indebted Vietnamese peasants for labor. Land tenancy patterns began to shift, particularly in the south, and the percentage of landless tenant farmers grew rapidly.³⁰ There emerged a wealthy, French-educated, landowning elite. In the Tonkin area the French developed extractive industries, and there began to develop an industrial working class. The French also held a monopoly on salt, alcohol, and opium. Commercial development required an infrastructure, and the French made extensive use of *corvée* labor in the construction of railroads and highways. As a result of French modernization of agriculture, rice production increased. However, because of French exploitation, actual consumption of rice declined, the increase in production being exported rather than consumed. Another consequence of exploitation was the development of a dual economy, one village-based, for local production and consumption, the other urban, cash-based, and oriented to commercial trade. Many of the French and Chinese took advantage of the differential between the two economies, gathering large profits to themselves at the expense of the rural peasants.

In contrast to the Buddhist countries of Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam has been influenced by China. This has separated them from their neighbors despite a common French occupation. The French entered Vietnam in 1777 to assist in suppressing a peasant uprising against the ruling Vietnamese families. The occasion provided France the opportunity to counter growing British and Dutch influence in Southeast Asia. The subsequent treaty of 1787 gave the French exclusive trading rights and access to ports. However, the terms of this treaty were never carried out due to the events of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Throughout the early 1800s, the