

**Vietnamese "Boat People" in Hong Kong:
Transition to Nowhere**

by

Lawrence Lam
Department of Sociology
York University
Downsview, Ontario, Canada

© September 1991

A Research Project submitted to Faculty of Arts, Committee on Research, Grants and Scholarships, York University, for consideration to the fall competition: Faculty of Arts Fellowship 1992-1993.

**CENTRE FOR REFUGEE STUDIES
SUITE 322, YORK LANES**

Vietnamese "Boat People" In Hong Kong

The Study

Throughout history, refugees have existed, but never until now have they existed in such appalling numbers (Malarek, 1987). However, statistics indicating that the current world's refugees, estimated about 15 millions (World Refugee Survey, 1989) cannot even begin to speak the cruelty, indignities, violence, tortures, powerlessness and helplessness experienced by the asylum seekers confined in refugee camps. Many of these refugees are stranded in camps for years and years supported by nations throwing money into the coffers of the UNHCR to ensure that these refugees are "protected" while durable solutions can be worked out.

While the memories of the "boat people" of Indochina have dimmed, but the flood of refugees in Southeast Asia has never stopped. While countries such as Canada, U.S.A. and Australia continue to select refugees for resettlement, some 107,571 asylum seekers are still languishing in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. Some 51,793 asylum seekers are currently held in 1 detention centers in Hong Kong (Fact Sheet, Hong Kong Government, May, 1991). During the first six months of 1991, a total of 8,869 asylum seekers arrived Hong Kong and are placed in these camps.

Responding to the decreasing number of refugees being accepted by other countries of resettlement, the Hong Kong government has established a policy of "humane deterrence" - taking all arrivals since June 1988 as "illegal migrants" unless they can prove their refugee status according to the 1951 UN Convention.

"humane deterrence" was instituted together with compulsory screening and threats of repatriation, voluntary or forced, were invoked to discourage other refugees from seeking asylum. The "bogus refugee" argument has found its way into the core of the rational of public policies as well as measures taken by the Hong Kong government towards the Indochinese refugees.

The experience with and policy towards the Indochinese refugee "Boat People" in Hong Kong, since 1975 have undergone a number of turns and emotive stances: from humanitarianism to outright hostility. The changes underscored an extremely intriguing context of the international dynamics of a set of external (regional and international - Britain, U.S.A., Hong Kong, China) and internal (domestic - media, local population) factors (Chan, 1990; Lam, 1990; Hitchcox, 1990; Davis, 1990).

The continuing high arrivals of Vietnamese "Boat People" who seem to have found an "escape" from their own uncertainties are painful reminders to the Hong Kong general public of their own perceived vulnerability. They feel as "if they are caught between China at their back and the Vietnamese pushing up against their stomach". The Hong Kong people know little about the Vietnamese, only what they can learn about the Vietnamese from the media - itself a direct result of the selective access Hong Kong Government gives media to certain types of stories: violence, crime, disease, costs and arrivals). Sadly, the human dimension - the wait between the walls and the endless shadows (Llambias-Wolff, 1990) is not reported. These Vietnamese "Boat People" are viewed as burden or costs, forever taxing resources of the state, casting them into beings no one wants to inherit. Being stateless, unwanted and oscillating between freedom and delirium, these Vietnamese "Boat People" find themselves seemingly forever "in orbit", "in limbo" and "midway to nowhere" (Chan, 1990).

A visit to a refugee camp anywhere in the world is a sobering experience. Each and every refugee has his or her own nightmare that he or she could tell. For example, the parents of a four year old girl begged their neighbour to take their daughter in January, 1988, hoping if they could not reach freedom, their daughter would. Several months later, they got their chance to leave and arrived Hong Kong. However, since their daughter arrived before the implementation of the "screening policy", she was defined as a refugee while they themselves were defined as "illegal immigrants" and were detained in detention centre pending repatriation. If they attempt to claim their daughter, it will change the daughter's status from refugee to illegal - a choice, if made, would defeat their intention in the first place.

A woman with her 4 year old son came to Hong Kong without her husband and she said that she was afraid to sleep at night because when she first came to the camp, she was awakened by men touching her in the darkness. She now sleeps only during the day when her 4 year old son can keep watch (Beiser, 1989).

The detention policy has a detrimental on the everyday life of refugees, in particular, children. A story told repeatedly by workers in the camps is a poignant example: A mother was called to the fence by her son, who said, "Mother, mother come hear it! There is a dog outside the fence and it won't stop barking." The mother heard the chirp of a bird, and realized that her son did not know the difference between the sound of a bird and a dog.

In spite of the fact that thousands of refugees are stranded in camps for years, there is a paucity of knowledge about refugee camps. Few studies have attempted to systematically examine the relationship between the conditions of the camps and the socio-psychological well-being of the refugees. Furthermore, while there exists a good

deal of interest in understanding the initial trauma of separation and loss, and a growing body of research on the difficulties of resettlement (Indira, 1984; Lam, 1983 1985; Chan and Lam, 1983), very few systematic study has been done regarding specifically the experience and conditions of refugees in transit camps of first asylum countries and the possible enduring impact on their subsequent adjustment to life in resettlement countries, or after repatriation. As well, what conditions of life for the refugees have been created and perpetuated by particular refugee policy response and the impact of such policy responses on the everyday life of refugees are cogent questions of immediate concern to refugee studies. Confined to a prison-like regime, refugees have been viewed as victims whose experience with the refugee conditions in camps has been characterized as one of "helplessness", 'meaninglessness' and "alienation" (Hitchox, 1990). However, there is only a very limited stock of knowledge about how the refugees, individually or in groups, go about making sense of and coping with the stressful conditions of camp life (e.g., overcrowding, lack of privacy, violence, uncertainties of resettlement, compulsory screening procedure, a particular type of camp management by correctional or quasi-military staff, etc. in order to recapture their being and identity. It is within this context that this study is aimed at offering systematic, empirical and comprehensive information focusing on "what happens in these transit camps" and the impact of these experiences on the refugees - how they come to terms with their past and thus with their present (the possibility of no exit - transition to nowhere).

deal of interest in understanding the initial trauma of separation and loss, and a growing body of research on the difficulties of resettlement (Indira, 1984; Lam, 1983, 1985; Chan and Lam, 1983), very few systematic study has been done regarding specifically the experience and conditions of refugees in transit camps of first asylum countries and the possible enduring impact on their subsequent adjustment to life in resettlement countries, or after repatriation. As well, what conditions of life for the refugees have been created and perpetuated by particular refugee policy response and the impact of such policy responses on the everyday life of refugees are cogent questions of immediate concern to refugee studies. Confined to a prison-like regime, refugees have been viewed as victims whose experience with the refugee conditions in camps has been characterized as one of "helplessness", "meaninglessness" and "alienation" (Hitchcox, 1990). However, there is only a very limited stock of knowledge about how the refugees, individually or in groups, go about making sense of and coping with the stressful conditions of camp life (e.g., overcrowding, lack of privacy, violence, uncertainties of resettlement, compulsory screening procedure, a particular type of camp management by correctional or quasi-military staff, etc.) in order to recapture their being and identity. It is within this context that this study is aimed at offering systematic, empirical and comprehensive information focusing on "what happens in these transit camps" and the impact of these experiences on the refugees - how they come to terms with their past and thus with their present (the possibility of no exit - transition to nowhere).

Significance of the Study:

Since the seminal work of Pfister-Ammende (1949) on mental hygiene in Swiss camps focusing on the impact of the conditions, organizations, culture and atmosphere of the camps on refugees, there has been little systematic attempt at either theory construction or empirical research to examine the relationship between the conditions of the camps and the emotional and psychological life of the refugees (Chan and Loveridge, 1987). Rahe et al (1978) and Mayadas (1982), examining the effectiveness adequacy of services provided to Indochinese refugees in camps, touched marginally on the relationship focusing specifically on the psychological problems that refugees, as a result of their traumatic exodus, brought with them into the camps.

In an important theoretical contribution to the understanding of refugee movement, Kunz (1973:133) offered an insightful analysis of refugees in transit camps:

He has arrived at the spiritual, spacial, temporal and emotional equidistant no man's land of midway-to-nowhere and the longer he remains there, the longer he becomes suspect to its demoralizing effects.

The phrases such as "no man's land" and "midway-to-nowhere" have characterized the essence of life in refugee camps and particularly, the demoralizing effects that would have on the refugees. Kelly (1975:81) described the life in refugee camps as:

The Vietnamese role was passive: things were done to them; they did very little. And, like much of the camp life that followed, they stood in interminable lines waiting for something to happen.

Boredom, uncertainty, and helplessness of refugees in transit camps are common observations documented by other researchers (Liu, Lamanna and Murata, 1979). In his study of Vietnamese refugees in refugee camps in the Philippines, Hong Kong and

Knudsen (1983) characterized the refugees' existence as essentially "meaningless, uncertain, waste of time, boring and passivizing" leading to a constant shift between

hope and frustration. A Vietnamese refugee's "limbo state" has been captured (Knudsen, 1983:73).

We are refugees and have to put up with things. But we do need to know what our fate is to be. We need help to get out of the camp.... the worst of living here, you never know a thing.... you never have any idea what is going to happen.

The refugees' feeling of "in-transit", overwhelmed by the sense of not belonging, reinforced by a period of inconsequential waiting and deteriorating in the frustration of camp life have effectively left many refugees in despair and in a moral vacuum. However, this transit experience has been perceived as merely an empty interlude between two acts of some Gothic drama (Chan and Loveridge, 1987). Its enduring effect on refugees' lives (in refugee camps and in resettlement countries) and its importance in constructing a comprehensive theory about refugee migration are at best, an educated guess.

Chan and Loveridge (1987:756) argued that this phase of refugees' experience and its profound impact on the refugees' well-being cannot be underestimated because "there is a great deal of profound change which occurs in refugee's internal and external lives as a direct result of their experiences in the camps. It follows that resettlement countries need to have a greater awareness and understanding of this secondary traumatic experience." They further argued that resettlement should not be treated as a separate stage but as a continuous process of flight and adjustment. However, their analysis was based on secondary source of clinical interviews between 1981 and 1984 in one refugee camp in Hong Kong (there are at present 11 camps). Hence, their study may have a limited applicability to current conditions especially in light of the measures introduced by the Hong Kong Government since June, 1988, to discourage the Indochinese refugees from landing in Hong Kong.

In sum, lack of systematic and comprehensive information regarding this vital phase of refugees' experience has left scholars in refugee studies in a "state of limbo" in their attempt to build up a body of knowledge which should be both empirically and theoretically grounded. As such, the need to "fill this gap" has clearly underscored the significance of this study

Completion of the Study

In the summer of 1989, the applicant spent about three months working as a volunteer under one of the many relief organizations in Hong Kong. Visits to the camps allowed the applicant almost free access to talk to the refugees, other NGO workers, and camps officials. In addition, the visits to the camps allowed the applicant to apply the research approach - participant-observation, to obtain first hand knowledge about the camp life, and to gain sociological insights into social structure of the camps and refugees' strategies of coping - as copers, survivors, and warriors, creating a culture in their adaptation to the physical, interpersonal, and social environment and the external controlling forces of oppression. The interviews and observations have resulted in giving the applicant about 3,000 pages of "field notes" waiting to be analysed.

As an expatriate of Hong Kong, the applicant has maintained close contacts with some "key informants" who are either occupying important positions in the Hong Kong Government, working as executive administrators in camps, or as front line NGO workers in camps. This invaluable network has allowed the applicant to receive continuously current information about Vietnamese "Boat People" in Hong Kong. Documents and newspapers sent to the applicant for the last three years (since 1988) have yet to be systematically categorized and analysed

During the tenure of Fellowship, the overall objective for the applicant is to complete the analysis of data pertaining to the Vietnamese "Boat People" in Hong Kong. Upon its completion, it will be published by the Centre for Refugee Studies. It will become the first book providing a comprehensive analysis of the Vietnamese "Boat People" in Hong Kong and drawing important implications for resettlement countries.

In spite of our own internal problems of poverty, unemployment, and national unity debate, months and years from now, Canada will be called upon to continue to be a leading model of generosity for other countries by increasing her refugee intake. Inevitably, more and more of refugees being accepted for resettlement would have come from various refugee camps where they have spent a few years. How will young children who have known nothing but degrading life in refugee camps during their formative years be able to cope in a healthy fashion with any other way of life? How will refugees being confined in a prison-like environment, obeying a litany of institutional rules and regulations, and having their lives ordered and controlled by teams of men in uniform, be able to deal with the stresses and strains in their resettlement countries as if their "years of waiting" and "miseries" in refugee camps did not really happen? A comprehensive analysis of the "in-transit" experience of these refugees will provide insights and form an integral part of an effective resettlement programme to assist them to "put it together again" (Chan and Loveridge, 1987).

The Book:

Tentatively, the book will consist of:

- (1) The Boat People - A Profile
- (2) Hong Kong's Policy - From Humanitarianism to Hostility
- (3) Refugee Camps - Total Institutions

(4) Impact on Refugees

- a. Women and Children
- b. Family Structure and Roles
- c. Social Organization of Camp Life

(5) Coping Behaviours of Refugees In Camps

(6) Durable Solutions - Repatriation or Resettlement

(7) Conclusions

- Beiser, M., 1989 *Globe and Mail*, 2/24/1989.
- Chan, K.B., 1990 "Hong Kong's Response to the Vietnamese Refugees: A Study in Humanitarianism, Ambivalence and Hostility" *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1990
- Chan, K.B. and L. Lam, 1983 "Resettlement of Vietnamese Chinese Refugees in Montreal, Canada: Some Socio-Psychological Problems and Dilemmas", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, XV(1):1-17
- Chan, K.B. and D. Loveridge, 1987 "Refugees 'in-transit' : Vietnamese in a Refugee Camp In Hong Kong", *International Migration Review*, 21(3): 745-759
- Davis, L., 1990 "Mandatory Repatriation Is Not the Answer to Hong Kong's Problem" *Refuge*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (February 1990)
- Indra, D., 1984 *Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement: A Research Bibliography*, The Canadian Asian Studies Association.
- Hitchcox, L., 1990 "Repatriation: Solution or Expedient? The Vietnamese Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong" *Southeast Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1990
- Kelly, G.P., 1977 *From Vietnam to America*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press
- Knudsen, J. Chr., 1983 *Boat People In Transit: Vietnamese in Refugee Camps in the Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan*, Bergen Occasional Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 31, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen.
- Kunz, E.F., 1973 "The Refugees In Flight: Kinetic Models and Forms of Displacement", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 7:125-146
- Lam, L., 1985 *Vietnamese-Chinese Refugees In Montreal: Long-Term Perspective*, Working Paper #35, The Joint Centre on Modern East Asia, University of Toronto and York University.
- "The Attitude of the Local Population Towards Vietnamese Boat People in Hong Kong" *Refuge*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (February 1990)
- Lee, T., 1988 "Urgent Funding Sought For New Detention Camp", *South China Morning Post*, August 17.

Liu, W.T., M. Lammana & A. Murata, 1979 *Transition To Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America*, Nashville: Charter House Publishers, Inc.

Llambias-Wolff, Jaime, 1990 "Reflections on the Conditions of Exile" in Howard Adelman and C. M. Lanphier (eds.) *Refuge or Asylum - A Choice for Canada*, Toronto: York Lane Press

Malarek, V., 1987 *Haven's Gate: Canada's Immigration Fiasco*, Macmillan of Canada, Toronto. *bib id= may Mayadas, N., 1982 "Psycho-Social Welfare of Refugees: An Expanding Service Area for Social Work", International Social Work.*

Pfister-Ammende, N., 1949 "Mental Hygiene in Refugee Camps", *Uprooting and After*, edited by C. Zwingmann and M. Pfister-Ammende, New York: Springer-Verlag

Rahe, R. et al, 1978 "Psychiatric Consultation in A Vietnamese Refugee Camp" *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 135:2, February.