

Book Reviews

From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora



Khatharya Um

New York: New York University Press, 2015, 329 pp.

Southeast Asian Migration: People on the Move in Search of Work, Refuge and Belonging



Edited by Khatharya Um and Sofia Gaspar

Chicago: Sussex Academic, 2016, 230 pp.

Southeast Asia is a place of diverse cultures, peoples, and histories. The books under review here add breadth and depth to the lives of people in and/or from that region of the world. Today, Southeast Asia is imbued with meanings of home and homeland for thousands of people living abroad, from Hmong to Vietnamese and from Filipinos to Cambodians.

Since the 1970s, many books have been published about the Southeast Asian diaspora. Khatharya Um's *From the Land of the Shadows* is one of the latest to address what happened specifically in Cambodia in the 1970s under the Khmer Rouge and the subsequent dispersal of Cambodian refugees around the world, following one of the deadliest genocides in human history. Organized into three parts and seven chapters, this book provides coherence and continuity to our understanding of the experiences of Cambodians in Southeast Asia and the lives of Cambodian Americans in the United States. Many Cambodian Americans are looking back on that tragic saga and searching for new meanings to anchor their identities. Like other Southeast Asian refugee immigrants, they are at crossroads where longing for the past is central to their ongoing identity development and formation. That past, although filled with difficult memories, is inseparable from their lives in the present. "For the younger-generation diasporas, 'return' is not just going back to the past," Um writes, "but addressing the past in order to go beyond it, to pay homage to the painful history and the challenges of exile but also to the internal strengths of the diasporic communities" (251). For many, what constitutes this painful history is still vivid in their minds. Nearly "two million of the country's estimated seven million people" (2) perished from hard labour, disease, starvation and execution and 600,000 Cambodians were

forced to flee their ancestral homeland. Over 100,000 would end up in the United States as refugees, fleeing the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Through Khatharya Um's telling, what happened in Cambodia is not an isolated event. From her analysis, we see that the disparate histories of nations are linked in ways that are not always immediately obvious. Indeed, there are many layers to the larger story in Cambodia, all of which Um did an admirable job of untangling. Individual accounts, obtained from extensive interviews of adult and child survivors, are overlaid with political divisions within Cambodia; regional tensions encompassing Cambodia, Vietnam, and China; and colonial interests buttressed by French and American foreign policies. The conflicts in Southeast Asia, spanning decades starting in the 1940s, are local, regional, and international. Evidence of the magnitude of the violence and its aftermath are still visible in the form of physical, emotional, and psychological scars on the bodies of survivors, including children. In this regard, the chapter titled "The Children of Angkar" is especially compelling. The voices of those who lived through the conflicts in Southeast Asia as young children are given far too little emphasis in scholarly writing. I find the memories of Um's interviewees (who are now adults) to be an important dimension of Cambodian American history. The resilience of these individuals is remarkable and a testament to people's capacity to rise from the ashes of history.

Um gives clarity to a very complex history. Um is herself a Khmer who is now contributing to higher education through research and teaching at the University of California–Berkeley. This is an important note to consider within the context of the history of scholarship on Southeast Asia

in general, and Cambodia Americans in particular. The gaze on Southeast Asia has traditionally been a Western one. What contributions can indigenous scholars add to the burgeoning scholarship on the history of Southeast Asia and on the Southeast Asian American experiences? Within the framework of Asian American studies, how visible are the stories of Cambodian Americans? These are perplexing interdisciplinary questions that Um takes into consideration in framing her work. I applaud her for placing the narratives of her informants at the confluence of competing local, national, and global stories. In this highly textured book, we can see how central the Cambodian American experience is to the exploration of open-ended concepts such as home, homeland, exile, belonging, and return.

Within the last five decades, how has Southeast Asian migration added to the debate on the meaning of *transnational*? How are they a part of the modern flow of people that has challenged our understanding of national borders, or of home and homeland? More specifically, how are Southeast Asians rebuilding their lives outside of Southeast Asia? These questions are central to *Southeast Asian Migration: People on the Move in Search of Work, Refuge and Belonging*. Nine chapters explore a broad range of issues related to Southeast Asian communities in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the United States. "Of the world's 105.5 million migrant workers, an estimated 14 million are from Southeast Asia, of whom 9 million are from the Philippines." The chapters in this volume reflect this staggering number; four out of the nine chapters are devoted to the lives of Filipinos living in Italy, France, United Arab Emirates, and the United States. The remaining five chapters focus on Vietnamese families in Poland; Hmong American individuals whose identities straddled several countries simultaneously; Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand; displaced Southeast Asian refugees living at the Burmese-Thai border; and political activism among younger generations of Cambodians in the West, especially the United States.

Based on original ethnographic fieldwork research, *Southeast Asian Migration* is aimed at a vast audience that includes "academicians, advocates, policy makers, and concerned citizens" (3). As the editors cogently note, the lives explored in this anthology are diverse, complex, and dynamic. Taken together, the chapters highlight key themes, concepts, and issues that continue to generate discussion and debate in the field of migration and/or Southeast Asian diasporic studies. One concept in particular is that of *generation*. Who are the first generation? Who constitute the 1.5 generation? And who are the 1.8 generation? Why do these distinctions matter? As the contributors have collectively affirmed, they matter because generational differences are an important

dimension to our understanding of the complex changes that accompany adaptation as people incorporate new values, ideals, and traditions into family and community life. Generational differences in attitude, or in the rate of acquisition of host country languages, for example, are sources of tensions that can permanently alter the dynamics of the family (e.g., chapters by Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot and Grazyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz). For the first generation, there is a robust desire to retain their cultural heritage as much as possible. People's outlooks are still informed by the teachings of their parents and grandparents. Much of their identity is invested in traditional practices linked to the "homeland." For their children, the concern is no longer solely about preserving self and culture, but more about inserting themselves strategically in the present. How do they fit into modern society as citizens of the world? How can they adapt so that they can take advantage of the opportunities not readily available to their parents? Moreover, can ideas of family be redefined, as people acquire new awareness and sensibilities, to include interracial marriages, or even gay and lesbian partnerships? What's to become of their identities as Southeast Asians learn to be Polish, Italians, Americans, or Emirati?

As the case studies in this volume suggest, Southeast Asians have established vibrant communities in many places around the world. In turn, they also are having to face perplexing issues head on. For example, in many of the communities cited, it is necessary for people across generations to reassess their sense of place and belonging. What can we learn about how they are asserting themselves in order to claim their place in their respective communities? Belonging is achieved through social integration and collective responses to both internal and external pressures. On the one hand, belonging is a bodily experience: it is visceral and intimately personal. On the other, it is political, grounded in ideas of birth, nationality, and citizenship. Belonging is embedded in the narratives of individuals regarding who they are, where they live, where they came from, and what they hope to become. Belonging is thus a fluid and elusive concept, informed by everyday decisions and choices as people live out their lives. The experiences of Southeast Asian migrants represent an important dimension to our understanding of the consequences of the global flow of people in the 21st century. Their stories of change and infinite possibilities are a global story. The voices emanating from this anthology reveal the balancing act (10) required of all of us as contemporaries in a world marked by fascinating changes.

Vincent K. Her, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, can be reached at vher@uwlax.edu.