In September 1975, a group of determined Vietnamese men participated in an elaborate and highly choreographed political demonstration in a U.S. refugee camp on Guam, a U.S. island territory in the Pacific. Four men volunteered to have their heads shaved in a public performance of dissent. A makeshift platform served as a stage. Two men sheared the hair off each protester. The men bowed their heads as their hair fell to the ground. Dozens of supporters surrounded the men and witnessed the scene. These activists wanted a ship so they could return to Vietnam under their own command. In the background, a banner proclaimed boldly in English, “36 Hours Hunger Sit-In. Quiet & Hair-Shaving Off to Pray for a Soon Repatriation.”

With the collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975, more than 125,000 Vietnamese fled the country. The U.S. government directed them to Guam for initial processing, and the vast majority soon gained resettlement in the United States. However, these protesters were different. They had also evacuated South Vietnam in its chaotic last weeks, but once on Guam, approximately 2,000 of them realized they did not want to resettle in the United States. Some had spouses and children who had been left behind, others were elderly and feared an unknown future, and still more were young men in the South Vietnamese Navy who had been at sea when Saigon fell and whose ships simply never returned to port. Their protests unnerved U.S. officials, who had not anticipated that any Vietnamese would want to return to communist-controlled Vietnam. There was no plan for them. The would-be repatriates directed their message to the American, Guamanian, Vietnamese, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) officials who controlled their future, and they used every tool they could muster: letter writing, elected delegations, hunger strikes, sit-ins, marches, and even

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threats of violence. These men and women held their ground on Guam and insisted in no uncertain terms that they wanted to be repatriated. In a matter of months, they would succeed in forcing the hand of the United States, and most would choose to return to Vietnam.

Fast forward twenty years and turn to Palawan, an island within the Philippine archipelago with its own American colonial legacy. It too hosted a camp for Vietnamese men and women, from 1980 through 1996. During these years, approximately 40,000 Vietnamese transited through this camp, and most resettled in the United States. But not all. After 1989, not everyone gained de facto refugee status, and by 1996, approximately 2,000 Vietnamese who had been “screened out” remained in the camp. Most had been waiting there for more than five years, insisting that they were refugees and deserved resettlement in a country like the United States or Canada. The Philippines and the UNHCR disagreed. They had determined that these Vietnamese men and women had not produced evidence of political persecution, and therefore they were not refugees entitled to resettlement. By 1996, all “screened out” Vietnamese were slated for repatriation.

Like those on Guam before them, this group of Vietnamese took militant action. Over the course of the 1990s, the Vietnamese in Palawan engaged in

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hunger strikes, mass demonstrations, and acts of self-mutilation. There is an extensive documentary account of Vietnamese protesting within the camp with techniques that often looked remarkably like the earlier protests in 1975. In a striking 1993 photograph, a group of almost a dozen Vietnamese men and women solemnly protested inside the camp. They sat beneath a hand-made sign: “Hunger Strike for Refugee Status.” Some of the hunger strikers looked directly at the camera, while others gazed away. The picture captured a melancholy moment, but the protest, including the decision to wear matching white headbands, was clearly organized and choreographed. However, in contrast to the repatriates on Guam, the Vietnamese in Palawan held the opposite goal: they rejected repatriation at all costs.

When the Philippine government organized a forced repatriation flight in February 1996, the Vietnamese camp members physically attempted to block the runway where the plane was poised to take off. The camp abutted the provincial airport, and hundreds of Vietnamese men and women flooded the airfield. Individuals cried, prayed, and protested, with the goal of stopping the repatriations with their bodies. Armed Filipino soldiers responded to the protesters with water cannons and pushed hundreds of Vietnamese off the runway. They ensured the planes, with more than eighty Vietnamese on
board, could leave. The Philippine government claimed that all the Vietnamese on the plane were there voluntarily, but as one reporter commented, “At least one man was seen to be bodily carried . . . others were dragged.”

These images remained with me long after I first encountered them. They were evidence of Vietnamese protest in the most unexpected of places, a refugee camp on Guam right after the collapse of Saigon and an island in the Philippines twenty years later, when most people were no longer thinking about refugees in Southeast Asia. The symmetry and disjunction between these stories have propelled my work on this book ever since.

After 1975, close to 800,000 individuals left Vietnam by boat, survived, and sought refuge in camps in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. Although not the only large refugee population of the era, Vietnamese were the most visible because of the failed U.S. war in Vietnam. Newspapers, magazines, and television news broadcasts amplified stories of the war’s end and of the subsequent refugee population to an American audience. In 1975, there were more than eight hundred stories in the New York Times alone. International attention peaked again in the winter of 1978–1979, when tens of thousands of Vietnamese “boat people” took to the seas. The UNHCR dedicated unprecedented dollars and staff to the camps and programs in Southeast Asia. While interest in the Vietnamese escapes and camps waned in the United States, the politics of Vietnamese refugee status and resettlement remained front-page news in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and into the early twenty-first century.

This book probes questions that remain all too relevant today: Who is a refugee? Who determines this status? And how do the experiences of refugees resonate at the highest political levels and in local communities that are often imagined to be in the most peripheral of places? Unquestionably, international power dynamics shape refugee policy, but so too do specific regional pressures on first-asylum territories and activism within the camps themselves. This book argues that in order to understand refugee politics, one must look at the camps, the places that hosted them, and the people inside.

In Camps moves beyond the familiar terrain of the United States and resituates the main story in Southeast Asia, Guam, and Hong Kong. Focusing on the camps and host territories makes these places of transit and detention visible and alive. Guam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong all shaped the contours of international refugee policy. Each of these sites developed its own vision of humanitarianism, and their leaders sought to define themselves...
as being either in alliance with or independent of U.S. policy. By magnifying the places in between, the camps are no longer marginal, but rather a key stage where Vietnamese, Guamanian, Malaysian, Filipino, Hong Kong Chinese, and international actors fought over who would or would not be a refugee.

This book also pairs Vietnamese activism within the camps with the growing political networks of Vietnamese in the diaspora. Vietnamese in the camps were far from passive. They established communities, angled for resettlement opportunities, and protested when necessary, sometimes resorting to extreme measures when faced with an undesired future. Vietnamese Americans (along with Vietnamese resettled in Australia, Canada, France, and other western countries) witnessed the indefinite waiting, harsh conditions, and ultimately the individual asylum determination or “screening” and repatriation process with anger. Many had their own traumatic stories of escape, and they used their access to western media and politicians to amplify the brutality of the camps and the validity of their refugee claims. And while host countries (and colonies), UNHCR officials, and U.S. politicians generally spoke of humanitarianism, Vietnamese Americans spoke of human rights and aimed their ire at both Hanoi and the camps themselves. The camps were potent sites, because they could be conduits to resettlement or they could be used to deter, detain, and turn people back. Vietnamese in the camps and in the diaspora understood the stakes and organized.

EMPIRE, POWER, AND SOVEREIGNTY: GUAM, MALAYSIA, THE PHILIPPINES, AND HONG KONG

This book zeroes in on the camps and emphasizes the relationships between local, regional, and international politics. Resettlement countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia receive disproportionate attention in refugee crises at the expense of first-asylum sites. As wealthy majority-white countries, they were credited with benevolence and generosity for accepting Vietnamese refugees. Historian Laura Madokoro has argued that these resettlement countries cloaked themselves in the language of humanitarianism even as they restricted the majority of people fleeing persecution and, notably, have stark histories of Asian exclusion. She writes that humanitarianism “disguised, rather than replaced” structures of restriction, enabling a “myth of beneficence” and “generosity” within majority-white societies. However, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and even
Guam were on the front lines and hosted more Southeast Asians than any western country. As a result, many Asian leaders claimed humanitarianism for themselves.

Sociologist Yuk Wah Chan has urged academics to reorient their scholarship and consider the “Asian part” of the story. Many U.S. and European-based researchers conceptualize the Asian host countries as mere way stations between flight and resettlement in the west, when in fact Asian actors played principal roles in the crisis. Contemporary media accounts and Vietnamese themselves also represented the camps as being isolated and interchangeable, seemingly anywhere and nowhere at the same time. However, the camps were not in amorphous, apolitical spaces, nor were they removed from local, national, or regional politics. In Malaysia, Vietnamese entered a country where Chinese Malaysians did not hold political power and were often suspect, while in the Philippines, the Catholic Church was a powerful ally for Vietnamese in the camps. In other words, where a camp was mattered.

Host countries and territories located camps as far from national capitals and seats of power as possible. Political leaders developed isolated islands and repurposed prison facilities, while others placed camps in close proximity to military bases, and in one instance, even close to a nuclear power plant. Places like the island of Pulau Bidong in Malaysia, the Philippine Refugee Processing Center in Bataan, and the Whitehead Detention Center in Hong Kong's New Territories were in remote, peripheral areas even by local standards. As scholars have argued, refugee camps exist uneasily within a continuum that includes humanitarian resources on the one end and prisons on the other. Unlike prisoners, individuals did not have a definite sentence, and many waited without knowing how long they would live behind barbed wire. Each camp marked a place of refuge and confinement where Vietnamese waited—sometimes months, sometimes years—for status, resettlement, or return. Hosts generally stressed their humanitarian credentials and generosity even as the camps became increasingly punitive. The camps captured the paradox between migrants’ mobility and detention.

Empire also mattered. Camps in Guam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong were all in sites of British or American empire. Despite the U.S. military loss in Vietnam, arguably its imperial nadir, the United States remained an economic and military superpower. It also remained a colonial power. Guam was (and is) a U.S. territory, acquired during the 1898 Spanish-American War and defined by the U.S. military ever since. Likewise, the United States gained the Philippines in 1898 and ruled it for more than four
decades. The Philippines became independent in 1946; however, the United States continued to assert economic and military control through its overseas bases, economic influence, and its support for the Philippines’ authoritarian Cold War leadership. During the Vietnamese crisis, Guamanian and Filipino leaders often hoped to gain international standing and burnish their humanitarian credentials by hosting Vietnamese. While Guamanians and Filipinos could act independently of U.S. leaders’ desires, they also kept their eye on what might curry the most favor in Washington, D.C.

In contrast, the territories which became Malaysia had been British colonies (through many administrative configurations), and Hong Kong too was a British colony until July 1, 1997. As such, both Malaysia and Hong Kong looked less to the United States (and its myopic Cold War anti-communist politics) than Guam or the Philippines did. Instead, they forged independent policies, which were often hostile toward the incoming Vietnamese and contrary to U.S. ideological objectives. Malaysia was keen to demonstrate its sovereignty, and its Cold War priorities included policing internal racial divisions, defending its northern border with Thailand, and envisioning an Islamic solidarity. It was willing to host Vietnamese, but with numbers escalating, there were limits. Hong Kong also faced internal pressure to have a more restrictive policy against the Vietnamese due to the large number of mainland Chinese “illegal immigrants” who were summarily deported across its border each day. Many also feared that Chinese rule might turn all Hong Kong people into potential refugees after 1997. Malaysian and Hong Kong leaders pressured the UNHCR and Great Britain to change refugee policy at key junctures, and they acted based on domestic politics, not U.S. Cold War dictates. Shining a light on regional actors reveals how they asserted their will on the international community and navigated the complicated legacies of British and American empire.

This is not to deny U.S. military, economic, or political power in the machinations of refugee policy. Over the course of two decades, the United States was the UNHCR’s largest donor, and it accepted over 400,000 Vietnamese from the camps (and more than 400,000 more through the Orderly Departure Program), far more than any other western country, with Canada and Australia following with close to 100,000 each. The U.S. government accepted hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in a departure from its immigration laws due to politics of obligation, generosity, guilt, and international expectations. And without question, all the Southeast Asian countries and the UNHCR looked to the United States to take responsibility for
the resettlement of the Vietnamese. It was an American war, and so the subsequent refugee crisis was seen as an American problem. However, unlike Hong Kong, the Philippines, or Malaysia, which hosted tens of thousands of Vietnamese for an indefinite time, the United States could be selective in who it would accept. Thousands of miles away, the United States did not face the same local pressures as the host sites, and it often tried to sidestep the hard choices at hand, pointing to the UNHCR or some other entity to “solve” the problem of the camps. Social scientists have characterized this as the power of “remote control,” whereby wealthier countries keep unwanted migrants at bay and develop increasingly restrictive and bureaucratic measures to exclude individuals waiting outside their borders. With thousands of Vietnamese hoping to secure entrance to the United States from within the camps, one can see this development in practice. Yet Guam, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asian countries were not passive, nor powerless, and they too shaped the political terrain, which enabled Vietnamese to claim refugee status. Seen through this lens, the United States remains powerful, but it was just one player among many in the transformation of Vietnamese from refugees to asylum seekers to repatriates.

**HUMANITARIANISM, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR**

UNHCR officials, Hong Kong civil servants, U.S. elected officials, and Vietnamese American activists all battled over who upheld the values of “humanitarianism” and “human rights.” Although the two would seem to be natural partners, as many scholars have noted, human rights and humanitarianism are far from synonymous. By the late 1980s, human rights and diasporic Vietnamese activists found that their vision of human rights would come in direct conflict with governments’ more circumscribed commitments to humanitarian relief.

Humanitarianism generally encompassed rules of modern warfare, namely the care of wounded soldiers and prisoners of war, an adherence to political neutrality, and a basic bundle of protections for shelter, food, and medical care in moments of crisis. It also came to connote a politics of care for the needy, marginalized, and displaced. Historically, European nations and the United States commingled humanitarian work and the civilizing mission of empire. For example, the U.S. intervention in Cuba in 1898 and
the British support for Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire both became subsumed under the umbrella of humanitarianism. In this way, the language of humanitarianism was embedded in the racial and political hierarchies of imperial politics.

During the 1970s and onward, Guamanian, Malaysian, Filipino, and Hong Kong leaders all resisted this western monopoly on humanitarianism and pointed out that they provided the most care for the incoming Vietnamese. Hong Kong social workers, Filipino non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the Malaysian Red Crescent Society sheltered, fed, and cared for tens of thousands of Vietnamese who came to their shores, seemingly without end. In fact, many saw the United States and Great Britain as hypocritical because they called for humanitarian protection for the Vietnamese even as they enforced rigid immigration restrictions. In response, Southeast Asian leaders threw the language of humanitarianism back at the UNHCR, the U.K., and the United States. Even when Malaysia pushed boats back to sea or Hong Kong detained Vietnamese in former prisons, their leaders claimed the positive attributes of humanitarianism for themselves.

In contrast, human rights embraced individual political rights and a legal framework against torture, political detention, and domestic repression. Scholars have demonstrated that the 1970s were a watershed for human rights activism. Amnesty International gained prominence as a grassroots movement against torture and political imprisonment, and critics of both South American dictatorships and Soviet-era communism found traction in human rights. This book analyzes how lawyers and activists called on human rights and norms from the 1980s onward. The camps drew the attention of international organizations, like Amnesty International and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, and Vietnamese diasporic organizations based in the United States and Australia. Vietnamese activists, students, and lawyers remained appalled and traumatized by human rights violations in postwar Vietnam, but they also became invested in refugee camp conditions and asylum claims. They did so by drawing attention to the surveillance, squalid living quarters, and minimal legal rights Vietnamese possessed within the camps. In Camps argues that diasporic actors called on the language of human rights not only to challenge violations within Vietnam, but to galvanize support for Vietnamese within the camps.

In short, refugee camps checked both boxes, “humanitarianism” and “human rights,” in ways that could create contradictions. Vietnamese fleeing by boat needed immediate shelter and direct services. Their traumatic experiences...
inspired sympathy, and physical protection was part and parcel of the humanitarian zeitgeist. Caring for the Vietnamese was also an overwhelming logistical and financial challenge, and host countries and territories pointed to the extensive material and human resources they committed to the camps. However, once in camps, Vietnamese were often confined behind barbed wire and eventually engaged in legalistic asylum proceedings, needing to prove that they faced political persecution in Vietnam. The result was a standoff between UNHCR and local officials, who pointed to their humanitarian credentials, and a range of lawyers and activists who lambasted the camps as devoid of human rights. As W. Courtland Robinson, the leading scholar of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis, explained, the UNHCR valued a pragmatic humanitarianism even when it faced human rights critics from all sides. Ultimately, Southeast Asian and Hong Kong leaders succeeded in pushing the UNHCR and resettlement countries to take their version of humanitarianism seriously, even as Vietnamese diasporic activists targeted them for failing to protect human rights.

The year 1989 marked a turning point for Vietnamese refugee status. At a pivotal 1989 Geneva conference, the UNHCR, host countries and territories, and resettlement countries all endorsed a new “screening” process, which turned Vietnamese from de facto refugees into asylum seekers. All Vietnamese would now have to “prove” they were refugees. If they could not, they would be repatriated back to Vietnam. The rapid decline of the Soviet Union only cemented these changes, and after 1989, Vietnamese could no longer rely on Cold War norms or U.S. anti-communism alone to establish their refugee claims.

Vietnamese who remained in camps after 1989 were stuck between political eras as much as they were trapped in the camps. The Cold War’s “end” was uneven, and local specificities produced new chronologies and perspectives, particularly in regions defined by colonial histories. For Hong Kong, Tiananmen Square was a far more telling event than Berlin, and the 1997 reversion of Hong Kong from British to Chinese sovereignty loomed large. Moreover, thousands of Vietnamese remained displaced, and psychologically and physically unsettled, from the 1990s well into the twenty-first century. Throughout the 1990s, thousands of Vietnamese protested in Hong Kong, others set up community organizations in the Philippines, and still, tens of thousands who had waited in the camps for years returned to Vietnam, often under duress.

This book includes the years fully entrenched in the traditional understanding of the Cold War (roughly 1975 through 1989) and more than fifteen years after its presumed “end” in 1989 (through 2005). It reveals how geopolitical changes played out in the camps, and how Vietnamese had to recal-
brate their campaigns and choices in a new political era. In Camps shows the juxtaposition of clear turning points and the lengthy stories that uncomfortably seeped across these flashpoints. Looking at Vietnamese in camps before and after 1989 demonstrates the quickness with which geopolitics redefined Vietnamese refugee status alongside the fierce debate over the meanings of both humanitarianism and human rights.

**ACTIVISM: IN THE CAMPS AND IN THE DIASPORA**

Vietnamese also set the terms of protest. Far from being abject, Vietnamese were active players within the camps, petitioning for their resettlement cases, learning English, navigating camp bureaucracies, and mobilizing campaigns for and against repatriation. In turn, Vietnamese in the diaspora witnessed the increasingly brutal condition of the camps and decided to act. Sizeable numbers of Vietnamese Americans, particularly young people, became politically engaged through their identification with the Vietnamese in the camps. Many had fled Vietnam just a few short years before they became college students and young professionals in the United States. Motivated by a sense of injustice and the seemingly arbitrary screening processes, members of Vietnamese American organizations developed a sophisticated politics of empathy and worked to assist those who came after them. As a result, political activism took multiple forms, from desperate and physical protests by Vietnamese within the camps to transnational campaigns that stretched from the camps in Hong Kong to the halls of the United States Congress.

This line of analysis is inspired by the development of the field of critical refugee studies, spearheaded by Yến Lê Espiritu. Espiritu has criticized the American representation of Vietnamese refugees as a redemptive story that somehow justified the violence and military intervention in Vietnam. She argues against a “rescue” narrative which posits the United States as the savior and the Vietnamese refugee as the “saved.” Critical refugee studies challenges assumptions of refugee gratitude, and it resists the logics of neoliberalism and American innocence and exceptionalism. Rather than separating stories of war and stories of migration, it squarely points to the U.S. war in Vietnam and its imperial violence as central to understanding refugee trajectories. Scholars in the field also call for the authority of refugee voices and new ways of understanding refugee stories through creative and scholarly collaborations. They seek to showcase the multiplicity of Southeast Asian...
voices and jettison the representations of apolitical passivity that have been commonplace in popular and scholarly literature.20

Each chapter that follows includes the experiences of Vietnamese within the camps. Sometimes their actions were quiet, whether it was selling pho (Vietnamese noodle soup) to earn extra dollars, slipping outside the camp for a few hours, or learning how to tell the right story to gain refugee status. Sometimes Vietnamese even found moments of joy and friendship during their time in the camps. Other times they coordinated elaborate protests that could include hunger strikes and self-imposed bodily harm to draw attention to their campaigns. Their actions were militant and often politically astute. In all, their experiences disrupt an image of Vietnamese Americans as simplistically grateful or as somehow redeeming the U.S. war in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese exodus and its immediate consequences spanned more than twenty years.21 Much of the popular literature still fixates disproportionally on the South Vietnamese who left in 1975, despite the fact that they make up a distinct minority of Vietnamese diasporic experiences.22 The fall of Saigon is the standard starting point for works on Vietnamese migration, and in that regard, this book is no different. However, In Camps also analyzes the specificities of those who left Vietnam after 1975. In 1978 and 1979, the image of the “boat person” emerged on the world stage as Vietnamese fled in both small rickety boats and large merchant ships which had been organized with the acquiescence of the Vietnamese government. This population was disproportionately Chinese Vietnamese. In the 1980s, the Vietnamese emigrant population changed again when large numbers left from throughout the country, including southerners who had suffered in re-education camps in postwar Vietnam and individuals from central and northern Vietnam who claimed persecution and economic hardship. Vietnamese did not share a singular refugee experience, and instead there were temporal, regional, and ethnic distinctions.

In Camps also argues that diasporic politics became more powerful over time as the crisis stretched into the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Keeping its attention squarely in the camps, it does not investigate the politics of resettlement in the United States or other host countries. Rather, it examines how resettled overseas Vietnamese worked to advocate for Vietnamese in the camps, and it emphasizes the transnational nature of these organizations.23 It also emphasizes that these diasporic organizations did not speak with one voice. Young, enthusiastic first-generation Vietnamese American college students led grassroots organizations, other Vietnamese American leaders grounded themselves in the politics of Washington, D.C.,
and still others embraced an international sensibility that included volunteer work in Southeast Asian camps. Vietnamese American activists also grabbed onto the language of human rights, and they used it to challenge violations in Vietnam and the conditions of the camps in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. Looking at the camps deepens our understanding of Vietnamese American activism that was neither monolithic nor defined by a simplistic anti-communism.24

ARCHIVES, CAMPS, AND INTERVIEWS

The paradox of the refugee experience is that it is defined by both movement and stasis. Therefore the narrative of this book will move geographically through multiple sites but will also stay focused on particular camps and territories. It will move from Guam to Malaysia to the outskirts of Bataan Province and then into Hong Kong and finally back again to the Philippines. I do not attempt to analyze all the camps that hosted Vietnamese over the course of three decades, and so choices had to be made. There are key lacunae. First, In Camps only touches on the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), which helped facilitate migration directly from Vietnam to the United States in the 1980s and through the early 1990s. While hundreds of thousands left Vietnam through this route, those are different stories of negotiating bureaucracies and immigration processes from within Vietnam.25 Second, Thailand, Indonesia, and other host countries like Japan and Singapore appear only fleetingly here. Thailand in particular has an important and dramatic history because of the violent conflicts in Cambodia and Laos and the immense number of “land people” who crossed into its territory. The stories of Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese and Southeast Asian ethnic minorities dominated these borderlands and were constitutive of the refugee crisis and ongoing warfare there. Given the long chronology and disparate geography, In Camps follows Vietnamese sea escapes, at the expense of including the stories of Southeast Asians who fled by land.26

By looking at Guam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, this book also tightens the focus to colonies and independent states in the American and British imperial orbit. This framework reveals how Guam and the Philippines were more constricted by U.S. Cold War priorities than Malaysia and Hong Kong, and also how colonial territories (Guam and Hong Kong) negotiated their responses in comparison to independent states