

BOOK REVIEW

SURVIVORS: CAMBODIAN REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

By Sucheng Chan Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2004.

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Notwithstanding proclamations by Saloth Sar—more widely known as Pol Pot—to a U.S. news reporter that “my conscience is clear,” there is little dispute that the four years during which the Khmer Rouge (KR) presided over the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) were among the darkest in Cambodian history (Nate, 1997). Between one quarter and one third of the population was exterminated, largely the result of forced relocation of urban populations into severe rural labor collectives, indiscriminate torture and killing and, finally, the starvation and disease that followed the failed policies of the DK.

Aptly titled, *Survivors* details the experiences of Cambodians who are survivors at multiple levels. While Chan focuses on the experiences of survivors of these events that found their way to the United States, the title suggests several layers of meanings, including survival of the Khmer country and culture despite wars, multiple invasions, revolutions and colonial rule; the survival of Cambodian immigrants to the United States despite the horrific events that unfolded in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979; surviving the appalling conditions in the border camps; and finally, surviving economic, social and cultural hurdles encountered within the United States.

Chapter 1 briefly chronicles the historical and political events that culminated in the desperate, involuntary immigration of Cambodian citizens to the United States and other countries. Although the influence of French colonization, and later the United

States in post-colonial Cambodian politics, that contributed to the vehemently anti-Western policies of the KR could have been discussed at greater length, Chan’s multidisciplinary approach, using a blend of historical narrative and personal accounts, is particularly effective in relating the terror and despair that prevailed during this period and that drove thousands of Cambodians to flee their ancestral lands for unknown foreign domains. Chapter 2 relates the political difficulties surrounding the border camps, as well as vividly describing the squalid and dangerous conditions encountered by Cambodian refugees in the camps. Personal narratives of refugees who successfully navigated the Thai refugee camps provide a vivid sense of the degree of trauma experienced by the inhabitants and the often open hostility the refugees experienced at the hands of their purported protectors. Settlement patterns, including why Long Beach, California, and Lowell, Massachusetts, became large centers for Cambodian immigrants, are described in Chapter 3. The struggle for economic survival is outlined in Chapter 4, noting the difficulty post-1975 Cambodian immigrants—who lacked human capital—language skills, education, occupational skills, or transferable work experience encountered trying to locate jobs and earn enough to support families. Chapter 5 describes cultural differences and the stresses they created for Cambodian immigrants. Chapter 6 outlines family crises and sources of stress in the United States,

including gender and intergenerational role changes, welfare and gangs, and how families coped with these changes and stresses. Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on several coping mechanisms employed by Cambodian refugees to deal with their trauma and sense of loss at multiple levels. The effect of this trauma and sense of loss on refugees' ability to cope with difficulties encountered after their arrival in the United States is also explored. The narrative accounts of these subjects are particularly compelling.

While the initial chapters provide important—and at times, shocking—background information on the dire circumstances and sense of despair these refugees have had to endure, both prior to and after their arrival in the United States, it is the information in the last chapters that may be especially useful for the helping profession. In particular, the very high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression experienced by Cambodian refugees is discussed at length in Chapter 7. As Chan notes, investigators have suggested that PTSD should not be construed as abnormal in this population, but rather as a normal response to abnormal events. The effective means of dealing with PTSD in this population is particularly interesting. It largely involves group discussion and individual oral histories in a group setting, which normalizes experiences by members and helps them realize they are not alone. One investigator found that having a Nazi concentration camp survivor discuss his experiences made Cambodian refugees realize their experience was not uniquely Khmer in nature, helping them overcome their extreme sense of shame at what members of their community had committed. Chapter 6 has an extensive discussion on the often-negative impact of differential rates of acculturation among family members, patterns of segmented assimilation and changes in gender roles on family structure in the United States. Chan also

makes the observation that, because of the de-industrialization of the United States as a result of the global economy, “opportunities for intergenerational upward mobility that earlier European immigrants enjoyed have become scarcer.” In addition, the racial tension experienced by Cambodians that immigrated to the United States following the end of an unpopular war in Indochina is noted to have contributed to the difficulties they experienced. Chan’s use of narratives to emphasize points made in her discussion highlights the importance of the personal narrative in both validating information presented and underscoring the impact the many traumas experienced at the hands of the KR, in the refugee camps and, finally, in the United States, have on the individual.

This outstanding book is an important reference for anyone studying refugee populations, particularly Cambodian refugees in the United States, both for the information provided as a result of extensive research and interviewing, as well as the comprehensive bibliography.

References

- Thayer, N. (1997, October 30). Day of Reckoning. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14-20.

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