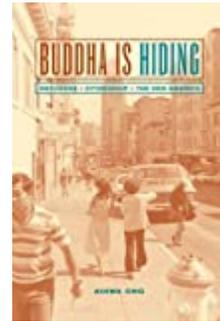




Aiwha Ong. *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003. xix + 333 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-23824-4; ISBN 978-0-520-22998-3.



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Attending to Human Details

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Cold War politics brought about one of the most devastating wars in world history in Southeast Asia. Since the end of the Vietnam War, thousands of scholarly studies, memoirs, and films have attempted to capture what happened from primarily the point of view of westerners who were in Southeast Asia during that time frame. Such popular films as *The Killing Fields* exposed the chilling activities of the Pol Pot regime during the mid-1970s that resulted in the death of between one and three million Cambodians. Those who escaped and found temporary refuge in neighboring countries embarked on a journey that would lead them to many western societies with political, economic, social, and cultural practices that differed significantly from their homeland. In *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, Aiwha Ong explores the lives of Cambodian refugees in Oakland and San Francisco, California, from the mid-to late 1980s. She argues that while refugees become subjects of norms, rules, and systems, they also modify practices and agendas while nimbly deflecting control and interjecting critique. While Cambodian refugees are subjects who are

acted upon, they also act on their own behalf in pursuing values and assets that may contradict the ones assigned to them by the prevailing norms. The greatest insight of this book is that Ong not only gives voice to Cambodian war survivors, but also examines how the refugee is reconceptualized in various institutions. Her sample consists of both poor families living in poverty, primarily older women with limited formal education, and those who are in the middle class. Their experiences of living in rural Cambodia before and after the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975 and then becoming refugees in Thailand present a truth that can only be obtained through in-depth ethnographic interviews.

Ong begins by capturing Cambodian refugees' memories of war, starvation, and escape to refugee camps in neighboring countries. Life under the Pol Pot regime is described as a period of increased insecurity and the beginning of changing gender relations. Traditional Buddhist values of womanhood were challenged as women became victims of sexual violence and forced marriages. Once their journey reached Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand, it took on a different form. Women were

introduced to dependency on Western institutions that provided the basic necessities of life. Ong argues that such “institutional dependence was among the initial lessons in the meaning of citizenship” (p. 56). Cambodian refugees learned early on in the refugee camp that gaining access to resources depended on correctly labeling themselves. Not doing so could have detrimental effects on their future. One of the critical points Ong makes, however, is that service workers in the refugee camps often did not possess the cultural competency necessary to effectively make decisions for Cambodian refugees. She argues that the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) representatives’ lack of cultural and political knowledge to assess applicants’ stories accurately as well as their fear of letting communists through affected the fate of many. For example, during interviews with INS officials Cambodians and other Southeast Asian refugees were often overwhelmed with language barriers and mistrust of authorities resulting from Communist affiliations. Consequently, their application for resettlement in America may have been denied.

Once Cambodian refugees arrive in America, they are confronted with a variety of professional service providers, including public health, welfare offices, and the legal system. Such interactions gave service providers the authority to determine “accounts of who the clients were, what was wrong with them, what was to be done, and how to go about doing it in order to succeed in America” (p. 276). Such authority resulted in the refugees having to define and redefine themselves to “fit” into particular categories in order to obtain resources for survival. Cambodian refugees thus live contradictory lives. For example, through my interviews with Southeast Asian welfare clients in Minnesota after the passage of the 1996 welfare reform law, I discovered many who relied on food shelves to get them through the month. Although the food available at food shelves did not meet their dietary needs, they accepted and stored them in basements because they did not want to offend workers who were trying to help them.

The most important contribution of this book is Ong’s ability to reveal “truths” from the perspective of Cambodian refugees themselves. Many reports and discussions about the resettlement of Southeast Asians focus on such illnesses as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mental health related issues. Consequently, a variety of health organizations and community clinics have been established to respond to them. However, many merely identify the problems to obtain funding resources to “solve” these refugee problems. What Ong reveals

is refugee agency in establishing strategies to maneuver through systems and institutions to obtain the basic necessities of life. For example, she states, “for many refugees, being categorized as depressed or sick sometimes became inseparable from getting health attention and welfare benefits, so that refugee patients came to understand that the stakes involved in the medicalized labeling used by health and refugee services were but an aspect of the broader regulation of their daily lives and access to a plethora of resources” (p. 96). Although resources are more apparent within the welfare system, Ong strengthens this point by discussing the high rate of conversion to Mormonism as a vehicle for gaining emotional and material support through the church. Clearly, Cambodians learn to negotiate institutional rules that provide access to resources.

Other issues discussed in the book include changing family dynamics. The change in power relations between parents and children led to children being frustrated with parents not being able to help them with homework. Further, when parents have to rely on children to translate, it often leads to a devalued status for parents while giving children unexpected power. Such conflicts force parents to fear their own children, in particular if they are involved in gang-related activities. For men and women, welfare dependency increased women’s power relative to men’s. Despite their good intentions, Ong argues that service providers exercised power bestowed upon them by systems and institutions to dominate Cambodian refugees and alter traditional gender relationships. She writes, “the identity of the social workers depended on their daily work of ‘empowering’ and ‘liberating’ refugee women, even when they were also sympathetic to the men. By having the right to intervene in domestic disputes and to set new norms of gender behavior, service workers were able to redefine refugee ethnicity morally, a process that also legitimized their professional domination over impoverished, disadvantaged, and racialized Americans” (p. 167). Intervention by service providers has not always been sensitive to cultural beliefs imbedded in Khmer society and the unbearable conditions under which Cambodian men and women live in inner-city America that lead to abusive situations. Consequently, some intervention strategies do more harm than good. For example, when marital difficulties are brought to the attention of service providers, many either call the police or encourage the women to get out of the situation without a good understanding of Khmer culture that relies on family and community leaders to help resolve issues. Ong discusses the case of an elderly couple, Mr.

and Mrs. Sin, who have fought for many years. In her search for help in dealing with her husband, Mrs. Sin turns to a health worker. During one argument, Mr. Sin pushed his wife and, as she fell backwards, injured her forehead. After visiting the health worker the next day, the health worker arrived with the police to take Mrs. Sin to a women's shelter. After ten days in the shelter, Mrs. Sin returned home and the family no longer wanted to interact with the health worker, who urged Mrs. Sin to press charges of battery against her husband.

In summary, *Buddha is Hiding* presents a different perspective on Cambodians' escape from persecution and starvation to being defined as refugees. Their lives are transformed over and over again through space

and time as they are funneled into the American underclass. Being Hmong American and a former refugee child, the stories Ong describes are common experiences I have lived and/or heard from my elders. Ong has done an outstanding job of exploring the lives of Cambodian refugees. Welfare reform and devolution since 1996 have portrayed Southeast Asian refugees, in particular Hmong, as lazy subjects draining the system. Ong validates the high percentage of welfare usage among Southeast Asians, but she successfully shows that such dependency on an array of services was learned in refugee camps. This book should serve as an example of what attending to human details can reveal and how it can contribute to the body of knowledge about Cambodian refugees as well as other racialized Americans.

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