

*The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of Vietnamese Boatpeople*

Sophia Suk-mun Law

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Rarely has there been scholarship about Vietnamese migrants without making these subjects indicators of political betrayals and economic and cultural failures of (post)colonial nation-states. Rarely have we seen a nuanced, hopeful, well-balanced analysis of Vietnamese “boatpeople”; more commonly, narratives about forced Vietnamese migration are characterized by tragedy and abject suffering. Sophia Suk-mun Law’s excellent *The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of Vietnamese Boatpeople* does precisely this nuanced, productive work.

This book documents a history of Vietnamese boatpeople in Hong Kong by examining their various artistic works that were collected by and produced within *Art in the Camps* (AIC), a three-year art project funded by the United Nations. This book explicitly states two purposes as it opens. The first is to rewrite a period of Hong Kong history by looking into textual materials related to the Vietnamese boatpeople. More specifically, the book first historicizes the migration and detention of the Vietnamese boatpeople within the political, economic, and environmental contexts of Hong Kong and Vietnam. Secondly, by reading the AIC’s creative works, the book reveals the fear, angst, and hope of the Vietnamese boatpeople to illustrate the communicative capacity of visual art.

What makes Law’s *Invisible Citizens* unique is that it offers a significantly different perspective in causal relations between Vietnamese migration and the nation-building of Vietnam and Hong Kong. Instead of merely attacking supposedly tyrannical nation-building in (post)colonial Vietnam and Hong Kong, Law emphasizes non-political elements such as natural disasters and economic struggles as primary causes of the mass exodus and harsh lives of the Vietnamese boatpeople. More specifically, most studies have highlighted the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s fierce implementation of the so-called “people’s national democratic revolution” that supposedly forced the mass migration of Vietnamese boatpeople between 1975 and 1995. Meanwhile, as shown in Chapter 1, largely relying on Vietnamese government documents, reports, and data, Law argues that a series of natural disasters, including tropical cyclones and floods during the two decades, caused the large Vietnamese refugee outflows. Furthermore, while Law acknowledges the failures and struggles of the new Vietnamese government in reforming the national economy and politics after the national reunification, she still contends

that such failures and struggles largely stemmed from the effects of adverse weather. Strikingly, her environmentally oriented analysis of the displacement of Vietnamese boatpeople leads the author to define this migrant population as “environmental refugees.” In this sense, Law’s work constitutes a significant political, scholarly contribution to the existing categorization of Vietnamese migrants (political refugees and economic migrants).

In the second chapter, the author attempts to contextualize the forgotten history of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. Law, a Hong Kong citizen, hopes to re-examine the “core value” (197) of postcolonial Hong Kong in disclosing the neglected voices and images of the Vietnamese boatpeople. Nevertheless, the author does not see the Vietnamese refugees as marginalized foreign subjects in Hong Kong’s quest for a homogenous national identity. Instead, Law draws on local newspapers, governmental data, and NGO reports to assert that the increasingly harsh policies of the Hong Kong government toward the Vietnamese boatpeople arose from dramatically speedy Vietnamese migration and China’s attempts to influence British decision-making there. Moreover, Law points out that the public anxiety over the uncertain future of post-1997 Hong Kong constituted another cause of the changes in attitude and policy from sympathetic to disdainful toward the Vietnamese boatpeople. Consequently, the Vietnamese boatpeople were forced into detention camps and away from the Hong Kong public; the boatpeople’s struggles “behind barbs and wires” therefore were rendered invisible and inaudible in Hong Kong society and history. In general, with its emphasis on environmental aspects and domestic crises in Vietnam and Hong Kong, Law’s book is remarkable in that it goes beyond current postcolonial scholarship that largely perceives migrating populations as purely marginalized subjects of nationalism in postcolonial nation-states.

As stated previously, the book dedicates three chapters to analyze artistic works of the Vietnamese boatpeople to understand their various psychological worlds. Here, the book brings new insights into existing historiographies about Vietnamese migrants which have previously emphasized narratives of victimhood and suffering. The order of these chapters is not only chronological but also thematic: Chapter 3 describes lives in the Vietnamese refugee camps beginning with the implementations of detention camp closure policies in 1982 and 1988; Chapters 5 and 6 reflect creative activities and achievements of the Vietnamese boatpeople during the IAC project (1988-1991). Moreover, the chapter arrangement reflects the author’s insistence on the communicative capacity of visual art, as shown in Chapter 4. Throughout Chapter 3, Law critically reads reports, newspapers, and photos from NGO missions in detention camps in an attempt to make visible the lives of the Vietnamese boatpeople. The resulting images of the Vietnamese boatpeople in this chapter are full of struggles including “strict institutionalization” (81), “living with crime” (87), “vulnerable mental health” (89), “shattered childhood” (92), and “women at risk” (98). Meanwhile, Chapters 5 and 6, with the resources

of paintings and drawings, provide rather hopeful, transformative narratives about the lives of the Vietnamese boatpeople. Even the author's selection of creative works in these last two chapters reveals an optimistic perspective on the power of art as a tool of the Vietnamese refugees in search of "hope and transcendence" (167). In particular, in Chapter 5, Law selectively analyses paintings that reflect the boatpeople's horrific experiences: struggles to escape from death at sea, recollections of the loss of loved ones, "living in the 'cage'" [detention camps] (148), and "dying for freedom" (156). These reflections themselves helped artists to discharge some of their destructive emotions. In Chapter 6, the author focuses on artworks that deliver "a sense of serenity, quietness and a glimpse of hope" (xix-xx) of the Vietnamese boatpeople. For example, the paintings *Two Women Waiting* and *Two Men Waiting* are read as symbols of a "sense of perseverance and peace" and a "sense of solemnity and calmness" (177). In the last pages of Chapter 6, Law highlights paintings that are explicitly infused with hope for freedom, such as *For the Future of Our Children* and *Please Convey My Wish for Freedom*. This arrangement obviously aims to indicate painting as an artistic instrument of the Vietnamese boatpeople in their search for freedom. The instrumental role of art in its turn suggests the significance of Law's book in offering alternative ways of looking into the changing, diverse life of the Vietnamese refugees which must contain factors and moments beyond fears and resentments.