

Buried History and Transpacific Pedagogy: Teaching the Vietnamese Boat People's Hong Kong Passage Y-Dang Troeung

Abstract: Hong Kong received 223,302 Vietnamese “Boat People” beginning on May 3, 1975. The last camp in Hong Kong, Pillar Point refugee camp, was officially closed on May 31st, 2000, over 25 years after the end of the Vietnam War. The residuals of this violent past continue to haunt the collective memory of the Vietnamese in the diaspora, yet the Boat People’s “Asian passage” remains an untold chapter of Hong Kong’s national history. Exploring the complex relationship between global compassion fatigue, the camp state of exception, and storytelling as a refugee tactic, Vietnamese American writer Andrew Lam’s “The Stories They Carried” recounts the experience of Vietnamese refugees abandoned in Hong Kong throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in extra-territorial limbo between Vietnam and the West. This paper will discuss the experience of teaching Lam’s story to students in the local Hong Kong context, where refugee and asylum seeking policy continues to be a highly charged political topic. I consider the ways in which Lam’s text bears pedagogical resonance across the Pacific, arguing that the teaching of this piece constitutes the remembering of a missing chapter in both the Vietnamese American narrative and the history of Hong Kong.

Keywords: Asian American literature; Vietnam war; refugees; Hong Kong; pedagogy

Due to its geographical location by the South China Sea and its colonial port city status, Hong Kong received 223,302 Vietnamese “Boat

People” beginning on May 3, 1975.¹ While the Hong Kong government initially set up open camps allowing Vietnamese refugees the freedom to temporarily work outside the camps, by 1982 the government held these refugees in closed centers such as converted factories, military sites, and prisons. The government subjected them to arbitrary, controversial screenings that differentiated legitimate refugees from economic migrants. The latter, those denied refugee status, were repatriated en masse beginning in 1989 either through government channels or clandestine deportations. The last camp in Hong Kong, Pillar Point refugee camp, officially closed on May 31, 2000, over twenty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War. The residuals of this violent past continue to haunt the collective memory of the Vietnamese in the diaspora, yet the Boat People’s “Asian passage” remains an untold chapter of Hong Kong’s national history.

Globally, this history is understudied in academic scholarship and little discussed in the global pedagogy of the Vietnam War. The collection *Understanding and Teaching the Vietnam War* (2013), edited by John Day Tully, Matthew Masur, and Brad Austin, devotes significant attention to teaching the saga of the Boat People but does not consider geopolitical contexts outside of Vietnam and the United States. While the field of Vietnamese American studies has made considerable advances in bringing the stories of Vietnamese refugees into the public sphere, these accounts have similarly tended to focus on the site of trauma in Vietnam or the refugees’ experiences of resettlement in the West. As Yuk Wah Chan explains in her introduction to the collection *The Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora*, the world is familiar with the “same old story of refugees coming from the poor Third World and ending up happily in the First World. Yet, as a matter of history, the Vietnamese refugee story does not end there. A significant part—the Asian part—is still missing” (4). In her recent book *The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of the Vietnamese Boatpeople*, Sophia Suk-Mun Law asserts, “the history of the Vietnamese boatpeople in Hong Kong has been forgotten. Their pain and suffering, together with controversies they raised in Hong Kong society, seem to have vanished without a trace” (xv). Law insists that in the decade since the closing of the last Vietnamese refugee

camp in Hong Kong, “little has been done to address this history either by the public or local academics” (192–93).

Vietnamese American writer Andrew Lam’s “The Stories They Carried,” a story in his 2005 collection *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*, offers a compelling literary site for addressing this theoretical and pedagogical silence. Exploring the complex relationship between global compassion fatigue, the camp state of exception, and storytelling as a refugee tactic, Lam’s “The Stories They Carried” recounts the experience of Vietnamese refugees abandoned in Hong Kong throughout the 1980s and 1990s in extra-territorial limbo between Vietnam and the West. This essay will discuss the experience of teaching Lam’s story to students in the local Hong Kong context, where refugee and asylum seeking policy remains a highly charged political topic. I consider the ways in which Lam’s text bears pedagogical resonance across the Pacific, and I argue that teaching this piece constitutes remembering a missing chapter in both the Vietnamese American narrative and Hong Kong history. I will make specific reference to my teaching of the story in a course on Asian Literature in English at the City University of Hong Kong in 2013, where students encountered this text as simultaneously familiar and foreign. In reflecting on the pedagogical choices I made, I discuss the deployment of what King-Kok Cheung calls “pedagogies of resonance” in teaching Asian American literature outside of its original context in the United States (13). Cheung identifies five themes (the legacy of a buried history, hate crimes, self-hatred, the figure of the model minority, and stereotyping) and five pedagogical strategies (contextual enlargement, juxtaposition, reflection, transference, and inversion) that have proven to be effective in teaching Asian American literature in Asia (14–15). I discuss how I applied and adapted some of these themes and strategies in the classroom, foregrounding their effectiveness in creating a strong resonance with Hong Kong students’ local context and history.

What happens when Asian American literary texts travel from the United States to Asia, a new context in which they are neither entirely foreign nor entirely familiar? As narratives set partly or sometimes entirely in Asia, featuring mostly Asian protagonists, often employing

Asian linguistic, philosophical, and cultural elements, and yet, at the same time, uniquely hybridized as Asian American, Asian American literature is encountered as an uncanny object of “visceral dis/connection” by students in the Asian classroom (Wang 8). Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, editor of the 2012 “Forum: On Teaching Asian American Literature Outside of the U.S.,” explains that there is “a considerable and growing roster of professors across the world teaching Asian American literature. The ‘field’ is burgeoning, and it has much to tell us about Asian American literature as a body of work, as a subject of inquiry, as a node, as a window onto transnational realities we at once study and bring into being” (6).

As a member of this growing roster of professors since joining City University of Hong Kong in 2012, I think I also embody a somewhat uncanny image for the students in my classroom: born in a Thai refugee camp in the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide to Chinese Cambodian parents and then raised and educated in Canada before relocating to Hong Kong, I physically pass as a local citizen, yet I have quite a different set of roots and routes than my students, the majority of whom have lived their whole lives in Hong Kong. It is not uncommon for students to ask me with sincere curiosity why I do not speak Chinese or if I was brought up learning Chinese cultural traditions. I try to turn these questions into teaching moments and prod students to reflect on the Asian American texts in the course in which themes of immigration, assimilation, refugee experience, and (the challenging of) cultural authenticity come up repeatedly. Eventually students acquire an understanding of the harm culturally essentialist discourses of authenticity and purity have had on the formation of hybrid Asian American subjectivities. Students develop what I see as a respectful distance to the texts, recognizing their affinities while at the same time not presuming an easy identification with the category of Asian American. As Seung Ah Oh asserts, it is important for professors teaching Asian American literature in Asia to foreground the “universal” as well as the “particular” elements of texts in order not to inadvertently erase the “American” of “Asian American” (qtd. in Chung 15). Sau-ling Wong similarly insists that professors should account for how Asian students studying Asian

American literature undertake a number of “complex cultural negotiations” in the pedagogical zone “between true cultural affinity and easily identifiable foreignness” (32).

My students’ responses to Lam’s story certainly demonstrated these complex negotiations. The text delves into a dark chapter of Hong Kong’s history about which Hong Kong students know very little, if anything at all. The title explicitly alludes to Tim O’Brien’s well-known short story collection *The Things They Carried*, but Lam’s text shifts the focus from the stories of American GIs in Vietnam to Vietnamese refugees detained in Hong Kong in 1994. A hybrid genre text that blends autobiography and journalistic reportage, the story focuses on Lam’s time spent in Whitehead Detention Centre in Hong Kong in 1994 as a journalist and interpreter. The story begins with the Hong Kong government’s forced repatriation of thousands of Vietnamese refugees under the auspices of the UNHCR’s 1989 Comprehensive Plan of Action. When Andrew, the autobiographical narrator, gains privileged access to Whitehead as a Vietnamese interpreter for two human rights lawyers, he is unprepared for the abject conditions he witnesses within the camp and the barrage of stories from Vietnamese refugees looking to communicate their plight to the world. A former refugee himself, Andrew listens and records their stories of torture, forced labor, escape, and suicide. He understands that these stories are all the refugees have left as tactics of resistance. He or she who tells the best story to the authorities, truthful or not, might have a chance of averting repatriation. Andrew’s experience at Whitehead brings back painful memories of his own time spent in a refugee camp in Guam as a child. Outraged at the outset of the narrative by the Hong Kong government’s treatment of the Boat People and the West’s apathy, Andrew finds himself feeling complicit and guilty by the end. A dramatic climax occurs when a Vietnamese refugee named Tuyet asks Andrew to marry her so that she can leave the camp, forcing Andrew to confront his own conflicted feelings of responsibility and estrangement as a Vietnamese American. Although Andrew initially promises to help Tuyet, he ends up leaving Hong Kong with only the unpublished biographies, poems, and letters that the refugees entrust to him.

When I taught Lam's story to students in Hong Kong, I began by foregrounding the notion of a legacy of buried history as an important theme in the text and in the field of Asian American literature as a whole. The motif of submersion in Lam's story offered a good entry point. I asked students to consider the story's final passage: "Hon Vong Phu, so I read recently, had crumbled and fallen into the ocean. The stone woman and her child, broken into many fragments, are scattered now on the ocean floor. Their curse, released at last, clings to the fleeing people of Vietnam" (88). Hon Vong Phu, the narrator explains, is a goddess figure from Vietnamese folklore who turns to stone along with her child after waiting too long for her war-faring husband to return home. This legend inspired the name of a unique rock formation in the coastal province of Quang Ninh, Vietnam, near the Sino-Vietnamese border. The use of traditional myth and folklore in literature is something to which Hong Kong students are quite accustomed. The Chinese use a similar legend of an expectant wife turned to stone to explain female-shaped rock formations throughout China, including one in Hong Kong's New Territories called Amah Rock, Mong Fu Shek, "the stone gazing out for her husband." As an easy reference point for Hong Kong students, this allusion in Lam's story offers a pedagogical opportunity to discuss Sino-Vietnamese cultural connections in the context of empire. The myth in Lam's story encodes multiple buried histories, not only American imperialism and Vietnamese communism in the Vietnam War era but also centuries of Chinese imperial conquest in Vietnam dating back to the second century BCE when Northern Vietnam first came under Chinese rule.

My students found Lam's incorporation of this legend in a story about Vietnamese refugees effective for a variety of reasons. First, students commented that the tale reminds readers of the influence of Vietnamese folk traditions on the refugees' cultural identities, and that, like all refugees and immigrants, the Vietnamese carry these stories and traditions with them when they migrate to a new place. I explained to them that typical depictions of the Boat People as desperate, pitiable refugees ignore a rich two-thousand-year-old Vietnamese culture. Lam's mention

of Hong Vong Phu, while a seemingly minor allusion in the story, prompts readers to think of Vietnam's literary and cultural traditions. Second, because Lam introduces the legend through Andrew's account of a Vietnamese woman at Whitehead who almost died in the waters of the South China Sea, the students located the story's emphasis on women's suffering during and after the Vietnam War. I provided some background context on the underrepresented history of Vietnamese women in official narratives of the Vietnam War. Third, students admired the metaphor of the "curse" transferred from Hong Vong Phu to the Boat People to convey the tragedy of the stateless condition of Vietnamese refugees. Finally, students interpreted the image of the rock statue, fragmented and scattered on the ocean floor, as an apt symbol for the buried history of the Vietnamese Boat People in Hong Kong, where the government seems to have largely succeeded in erasing this historical event from a collective memory.

For most Hong Kong citizens, the term "Boat People" refers to the Tanka people, known as "on-water people" or "Nam Hoi Yan" in China, who first settled in the Yau Ma Tei area of Hong Kong beginning in 1916. Traditionally living on junks in coastal parts of Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Hainan, and Zhejiang provinces, a small number of Tanka people also live in Northern Vietnam, the reason the term "Boat Person" in Vietnamese originally referred to this ethnic group from China. As one student wrote in a questionnaire I distributed, "I didn't know anything at all about the history of the Vietnamese Boat People, let alone that of those in Hong Kong, before reading Andrew Lam's story. I've never really heard anyone discuss the plight of the Vietnamese refugees" (Troeng). The majority of the students echoed this sentiment since they had never been taught this history in school nor come across it in books or the media. A small number of students, mostly exchange students from the United States or Australia, expressed having a vague knowledge of the Vietnamese Boat People, though they knew nothing about the Hong Kong context. Students were particularly shocked to read Lam's vivid description below of the dehumanizing conditions at Whitehead:

Journalists were, by and large, barred from entry to this place known for riots and gang fights and mass protests and a handful of self-immolations. There were eleven people, mostly women, who disemboweled themselves in protest of being forced back. The place, divided into sections, is built like a maximum security prison. Barbed wire on top of five-meter-high chicken wire fences. (77)

As King-Kok Cheung writes, “scholars and activists in the United States have divulged lamentable historical chapters such as the genocide of Native Americans, slavery, and the Japanese American internment, but in some Asian countries many untold chapters of national history remain closed, to this day” (13). All students easily grasped this notion of the legacy of buried histories in Asia, having grown up with a strong sense of Hong Kong cultural identity defined vis-à-vis mainland China, where state silence still surrounds historical traumas such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Students were also keen to learn about other underrepresented historical traumas in Asia such as the Cambodian genocide and the North Korean famine. Whereas most students approached these histories as foreign traumas that had little to do with them personally, Lam’s story prompted them to confront their government’s complicity in the crisis of the Vietnamese Boat People. One student wrote,

Before reading Lam’s story, I believe that refugees will be safe once they reach the new country, as I assume the laws in countries receiving refugees will protect them. After reading Lam’s story, I realize that this is not always the case, as refugees are also unjustly treated in the new country (in Hong Kong in this example). The majority of them will be sent back to Vietnam, and their voice (their stories about oppression) is constantly “silenced” by the authorities. (Troeung)

Another student wrote, “After reading the article, I feel that I am able to understand what the refugees went through a bit more. Back then I have always thought life at the camps was temporary for the refugees. I never

knew so many of them had not been given any chance to venture out and faced no option but to return to their home country” (Troeng). Lisa Lowe argues that Asian American literature performs the important cultural work of a “tireless reckoning with America’s past—its past as empire, its international past” (76). As Lam’s story reveals, this literature can also do the work of reckoning with Asian imperialism and humanitarian state violence for Asian and international audiences.

My students were surprised to learn about the complex entanglement of the history of empire and colonialism in Hong Kong and the Vietnamese Boat People’s Hong Kong passage. Kwok Bun Chan writes that a shift from “humanitarianism to hostility and restriction” marked the Hong Kong government’s handling of the Vietnamese refugee situation over the twenty-year period of the crisis (383), particularly as Hong Kong approached the date of the 1997 handover. Rey Chow argues that during this period Hong Kong was a nation caught between two colonizers, Britain and China, the city-state’s postcoloniality marked by a “double impossibility” of submitting to either Chinese nationalist re-possession or British colonialism (151). Ackbar Abbas characterises the culture that emerged from this unique postcolonial context as a “culture of disappearance”—the paradoxical emergence of a Hong Kong identity on the verge of its feared disappearance in 1997 (7). While scholars have discussed the postcolonial impossibility the handover posed for Hong Kong citizens, they have paid less attention to the way in which Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong were also caught in the geopolitics of Hong Kong’s transition. According to Kwok Bun Chan, “Hong Kong experienced immense frustration in its dealings with the British government, for the latter had repeatedly refused to increase its own refugee intake, while insisting that Hong Kong not abdicate its role as country of first asylum” (383). Such frustrations with the British, coupled with the fear and powerlessness of the impending handover, led many “local citizens to [feel] irritated by the chaos inside the Vietnamese refugee camps. Hong Kong people knew very little about Vietnam or its people” (Law 192). The Hong Kong media targeted the Vietnamese Boat People during this period of public insecurity, stereotyping them as violent criminals and drug addicts and reducing them to a burdensome

problem that Hong Kong needed “to get rid of by the time China [took] over in 1997” (Lam 76).

My students reacted strongly, with varying degrees of anger and surprise, to the colonial connection Lam’s story uncovered for them. Lam, the narrator, writes,

In the *South China Morning Post*, letters to the editors are mostly anti-refugee to the point of being rabid. After almost two decades, Hong Kong is fed up. One resident urged that “Vietnamese people should be sent to labor camps to work as slaves.” Other letters suggested Hong Kong should force everyone back to Vietnam regardless of screening. These are presumably the same people who are themselves searching frantically for visas out of Hong Kong before China takes power in 1997. (77)

In response to this passage, one student wrote, “It is ironic, indeed, that Hong Kong people, on one hand, wishes to escape from the control of Chinese communism, but on the other hand, fails to be sympathetic and helpful towards Vietnamese refugees who wishes to escape.” In a previous class, we had discussed the discrimination emigrants from Hong Kong encountered after 1997 in places such as Vancouver, so students noted the ironic parallel of Hong Kong people’s attitudes toward the Vietnamese Boat People, who, to compound the irony further, were mostly ethnically Chinese in ancestry. One student responded, “Certainly one would imagine the Hong Kong people would have more sympathy towards others trying to escape a communist government, but in many ways I think it just made their hearts colder” (Troeung). This sentiment was echoed by another student who wrote, “I believe that the sameness of ethnicity will not change Hong Kong people’s ideologies much regarding the repatriation of refugees, as Hong Kong people are either apolitical or hostile towards Mainland Chinese people” (Troeung). Students also noted that unfortunately Hong Kong’s public perception of refugees has changed little in the past few decades: The government continues to view refugees from places such as Bangladesh, Somalia,

Indonesia, and Sri Lanka as economic burdens and troublemakers, and the liberal press frequently characterises Hong Kong's draconian asylum system as "Hong Kong's dirty secret" (Branigan) or "Hong Kong's refugee shame" (Lai and Tjhung). Gordon Matthews, author of the popular book *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong*, explains that almost all asylum seekers in Hong Kong are, out of necessity, forced to lie or fabricate parts of their refugee stories within the extremely narrow confines established by the UNHCR (175). This impossible dilemma for asylum seekers is a carryover from the days of the Vietnamese Boat People. Responding to this theme of lying as a refugee tactic as Lam's text expresses, one student wrote, "I think it was somehow unreasonable to ask refugees to have moral awareness when the cause for their repatriation was unjustified and when the judge and government are lying and ignoring facts all the time. And when it comes to a matter of life and death, it would always be a tough call on moral standard" (Troeng). Students' thoughtful responses suggest the extent to which Lam's text provoked them to reconsider epistemologies of truth and truth-telling as well as the racism and ethnic hierarchies that persist in contemporary Hong Kong society.

These hierarchies are deeply embedded in Hong Kong, a city Abbas describes as a space not only of disappearance but also "of transit a port in the literal sense—a doorway, a point in between—even though the nature of the port has changed" (4). Much of Hong Kong's population today consists of descendants of waves of refugees over the past 80 years, but students noted that this history seems mostly forgotten in the present-day public discourse about refugees. As Abbas explains,

while 98 percent of the Hong Kong population is ethnic Chinese, history (both colonial history and history on the mainland) has seen to it that Hong Kong Chinese are now culturally and politically quite distinct from mainlanders; two peoples separated by a common ethnicity, a first example of disappearance. This has produced many instances of mutual distrust and misunderstanding, with one side demonising the other. (2)

In recent years, these instances of mutual distrust include the Hong Kong government's ban on mainland Chinese giving birth and purchasing baby milk formula in Hong Kong—two policies widely supported by the Hong Kong public but decried by mainlanders as discriminatory and xenophobic. Just as Hong Kong people's fears of the loss of democratic freedoms reached an apex leading up to the 1997 handover, Hong Kong-China relations are at an extremity once again in the wake of the PRC's refusal to allow true universal suffrage in Hong Kong, a suppression of democracy that prompted the Occupy Central social movement (also known as the Umbrella Movement) in October 2014. At the same time, Hong Kong's record of discrimination against Southeast Asian immigrants dates back at least to the treatment of the Vietnamese Boat People and continues today with the state's exclusionary citizenship laws enacted against Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers. The high-profile killing of Hong Kong tourists in a hostage crisis in the Philippines in 2010 provoked further backlash against Filipino migrants in Hong Kong. All of these tensions arise against the backdrop of a perpetual neoliberal state discourse about Hong Kong's resource scarcity and its need to prioritize the city's economic self-interests. This highly charged local context of contemporary racial politics in Hong Kong framed our class discussion of Lam's story. The text provoked students to work through entrenched misperceptions and the negative attitudes they held towards the purported economic burden refugees and migrants bring to Hong Kong. Through a process of what Cheung calls "transference", students came to see "themselves as a culpable majority" (24), becoming "aware of their own upholding of an invidious status quo" (14).

The concept of compassion fatigue, a key theme in Lam's story, was perhaps the most difficult for students to grasp, perhaps because many of them were too young to remember a time when Hong Kong, or indeed the world, was more accepting of refugees. Susan D. Moeller explains that "compassion fatigue encourages the media to move on to other stories once the range of possibilities of coverage have been exhausted so that boredom doesn't set in. Events have a certain amount of time in the limelight, then, even if the situation has not been resolved, the media

marches on” (2). Students were interested in Lam’s explanation below of this phenomenon and its effect on Vietnamese refugees:

Once, during the cold war, we couldn’t get enough of their stories. Today, as the refugee crisis has become a pandemic, the charm Americans felt at the asylum seeker’s naïve enthusiasm for our country has turned into resignation and fear. The thirty-five thousand boat people of Southeast Asia now being sent back to Vietnam have no place in our New World Order narrative. (71)

Students understood the concept of becoming desensitized to the media coverage of continuous wars and disasters, but they did not quite grasp how devastating the effects of global compassion fatigue could be on the victims involved until they read Lam’s story. In their essays, students often noted that Lam attempts to give a voice to Vietnamese refugees who had suddenly become invisible in the global order and that his short story is a way of carrying refugees’ stories forward to a wider audience through the medium of literature. In class we considered that one function of literature—especially literature about refugees—is to humanize the marginalized and dispossessed, combat compassion fatigue, and counteract negative stereotypes circulated through the media. Students suggested that one way Lam accomplishes these goals is through the incorporation of his own personal narrative. In the story, the narrator describes the survivor’s guilt he feels about being one of the “lucky” refugees to be resettled in the United States in the late 1970s. Lam writes, “I lived the American Dream, grew up as an American in an American suburb, and graduated from a good university. I went on further. I fancied myself a writer. I saw myself living a cosmopolitan life, a premise of ever expanding opportunity and choices. The boat people who fled after the cold war ended, on the other hand, left Vietnam too late” (83). I added to the discussion that I, too, as a refugee from Cambodia, arrived in Canada at a time when the West was more compassionate towards immigrants. As Janet McLellan explains, the United Nations, working in conjunction with the Thai government, repatriated thousands of Cambodians in Thai refugee camps in the 1990s, around the same time

as the Vietnamese repatriation (15). I explained to students that my parents named me Y-Dang after the Thai refugee camp, Khao I-Dang, where I was born. Students seemed quite surprised by this information and commented positively on the impact that my personal story had on their understanding of the course themes and texts.

Such reactions may encapsulate something of the changing conditions of global pedagogy of English literature in a place like Hong Kong, where the globalisation of the university system and the changing demographics of faculty members, now frequently recruited from abroad, have begun to transform earlier paradigms of literary studies. At the City University of Hong Kong, this shift is most evident in the English literature curriculum that now encompasses courses in postcolonial and Asian literature in English alongside British and American literature. My department is also home to a unique MFA program in Creative Writing with a focus on Asian writing, run by the established Hong Kong writer Xu Xi. Through this program, students in my Asian literature class have had the opportunity to meet and hear readings by the Asian authors they are studying in the course, including Andrew Lam who gave a talk in the fall of 2013. The neoliberal imperative to internationalize English department faculty rosters in Hong Kong has produced conditions whereby two former Southeast Asian refugees, myself and Andrew Lam, could end up in a Hong Kong university classroom speaking to students about Asian American literature and the history of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. Such a pedagogical moment not only decenters the colonial tradition of English literary studies in Hong Kong, but also productively resituates Asian American literature as just one node—albeit a very important one—in the larger field of Asian literature in English.

When I started teaching in Asia, my colleagues in Hong Kong sometimes counseled me “not to expect too much” from the students in terms of their motivation and engagement with literature. Some suggested that students enrolled in literature courses merely to improve their English-language skills or to broaden their personal tastes and interests. They believed that students were more interested in studying British and American literature than Asian American literature since the former was

more valuable to them as cultural capital. To the contrary, I found Hong Kong students to be very willing to engage with the complex aesthetic and formal elements and the ideological dimensions of Asian American texts. They learned to appreciate the politically subversive traits of Asian American literature with regards to US culture, and they frequently commented on the way Asian American literature resonated with them personally in a way that canonical British and American literature did not. In the case of Lam's story, this resonance involved students' examination of their biases and internalised hierarchies as Hong Kong citizens. Chih-ming Wang writes that "as literature and theory travels beyond its originary context, it is inevitably resituated and recoded to adapt to the local context what matters to Asian American literature outside of the United States is the ideological, discursive, and institutional position it takes" (18). In teaching Lam's story in Hong Kong twenty years after the historical events in the story took place, I was, in a sense, resituating the "missing" Asian part of the Vietnamese Boat People's story back in its original context, reconnecting the story with the audience for which it was first intended.

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Notes

1 I employ the term Vietnamese "Boat People" throughout this essay, although I recognize its limitations: it is, to a degree, a historically misleading term (many refugees escaped over land), and it has been used in a derogatory sense to stigmatize Vietnamese refugees. Nevertheless, the image of Vietnamese people on makeshift boats trying to reach safe harbor in port cities throughout Asia remains a compelling icon of the mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees.

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