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Book Review: Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asian American Studies by Jonathan H. X. Lee and Roger V. Chung

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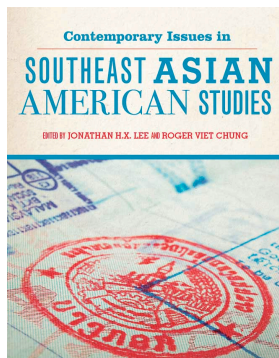
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Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asian American Studies consists of a series of short vignettes that would be a wonderful accompaniment for a more comprehensive reader on the subject. This textbook was designed for classroom use to expose students to some of the issues and concerns of the post-1965 immigrant experiences of Southeast Asians coming to the United States. While the pre-1965 histories of Asian Americans already has been substantially and authoritatively written, especially by Ronald Takaki, the more recent histories of Southeast Asian Americans awaits to be told. This reader provides some glimpses as to what this history might include.

The brief introduction points to the complexities and diversities in the experiences of recent immigrants from Southeast Asia. For example, while some 1,146,650 refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia came to the United States, from 1975 into the turn of the new millennium, this does not mean that all new immigrants from these countries are refugees. Another example, many Chinese Vietnamese and Chinese Cambodians, among other Southeast Asian Chinese, choose to self-identify as ethnic Chinese, which complicates the veracity of census survey information on the different Asian American populations.

Chapter 1 reprints the *Refugee Act of 1975*, the *Refugee Act of 1980* and the *Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987*. Chapters 2 and 3 provide useful discussions on “Southeast Asian American Wars and Movements” and the “Socioeconomic Status of Indochinese Refugees,” respectively. Chapter 4 provides an excerpt from *Time Magazine* on a young deportee’s success story as a break dancer, after being deported to Cambodia; but this is not the norm for many youth (e.g., holding refugee status or permanent residency status) who have been deported for committing criminal offenses before, legally, becoming citizens.

Chapter 5 reprints a news article on a dispute among Vietnamese Americans over the naming of “Little Saigon” because of its anti-communist connotation and the fact that the business district, it refers to, is no longer, exclusively, Vietnamese American but, rather,



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multiethnic. Chapter 6 reprints an excerpt on the difficulty Burmese poses for census takers because Burmese Americans, rarely, use last names. While chapter 11 concerns the hazards faced by Vietnamese American women working in the nail salon industry, Chapter 12 reprints a news release on former Thai slave laborers who were rescued from an El Monte sweatshop.

Subsequent chapters, also, feature some lively reading: Chapter 13 reprints a news release that examines issues pertaining to welfare reform and its effects on Vietnamese clients, who migrated to the United States in the early 1990s; Chapter 14 looks at some of the tensions and conflicts, and capital crimes, that occurred between Hmong Americans, “White” Americans, and Native Americans over hunting rights in Northern Wisconsin; Chapter 15 provides an original essay on the question of representation and the depiction of queer Pinoys in Filipino American films; Chapter 16 reprints a news brief on a Laotian American community’s fight for social justice against Chevron; and Chapter 17 reprints a research article on Vietnamese American gang activities. Each chapter also includes study questions.

The book has a few slight drawbacks, but again, not to outweigh its inherent value considering that it was prepared for in-class use. Chapters 7-10 seem somewhat out of place. Chapter 7 reads more like a brochure for the Thai temple and cultural center that it pertains to, while Chapters 8-10 are somewhat overly descriptive and don’t match well with the swift and informative style of the rest of the reader.

All in all, this is a wonderful little book of short vignettes on current Southeast Asian American issues and concerns. This is not a comprehensive or complete book but a course textbook that would make a delightful companion text for a history book in Southeast Asian American Studies. As a preliminary collection of informative and eye-opening vignettes on current Southeast Asia American issues, it will appeal to scholars of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies and community organizers and the general public.

Reference

Takaki, R. (1998). *Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans* (Updated and Revised ed.). New York: Back Bay Books.

About the Author



Kathleen M. Nadeau is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at California State University, San Bernardino. She has published two books: *Liberation Theology in the Philippines* (Praeger Press, 2002) and *History of the Philippines* (Greenwood Press, 2008), and co-edited the *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*. Currently, she is working on a history book project dealing with women's roles in Asia. She can be reached at knadeau@csusb.edu.



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