

Trauma Narratives: Collective Memories as Literature by Indochinese Refugees in the United States

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Abstract. Indochinese refugees in the United States are part of Asian Americans, whose narratives portray their life in their home countries, journeys to the new world and life in the United States, their new world. This study investigates three primary texts by American authors of Indochinese descent, including Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*, Sichan Siv’s *Golden Bones* and Sucheng Chan’s *Hmong Means Free*. These three texts are highly historicised, portraying traumatic experiences of Indochinese refugees who suffer from war and communist persecution in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, respectively. These texts are considered trauma narratives serving as collective memories of those people, which help them to remember their pasts and constitute their group identity. The narratives in the three primary texts also explain how Indochinese subjects come to be Asian Americans and reveal that in fact the United States is considered an important cause of their diaspora and trauma. The authors of those narratives are unable to eradicate the traumatic memories from their psyche, so they yearn for voices to vent out those memories as a form of healing. Their trauma narratives have become part of American culture which is partially constituted by trauma suffered by different groups of people in this country.

Keywords and phrases: trauma narratives, Indochinese refugees, collective memories, Asian American literature, Asian diaspora

Introduction

Since the fall of Saigon on 30th April 1975, after the American retreat from the Vietnam War, a huge number of people from Indochina including Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have fled their countries to escape from political persecution. According to Tenhula (1991, 6), the first wave of those refugees was the Vietnamese group who “were placed on military aircraft, transported to the United States, kept

in camps and eventually resettled”. After the first wave, there were other waves of refugees from Vietnam and the other two countries, Laos and Cambodia, who trekked across their borders to escape from the totalitarian regimes’ persecution and other horrible conditions in their countries and seek refuge in refugee camps in their neighbouring countries. Then, those refugees were transferred to Western countries for resettlement. Because the United States was closely involved with the Vietnam War, which physically covered the areas of the three countries—Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos—it has become the main destination of those refugees. As stated by Hein (1995), between 1975 to 1990, about two million people from those countries escaped from their homelands to Western counties; two-thirds of this group ended up in the United States.

Although Indochinese refugees managed to have a new life in this new world, they still suffer from profound trauma as the aftermath of war and communist persecution. In addition, the difficult journeys from their homelands, in many cases, amplify their trauma. As explained by Caruth (2016, 11–12), trauma is caused by “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations or other intrusive phenomena”. Trauma sufferers, according to Herman (1997), yearn to tell their stories, as it is believed that this action can vent out their painful memories. Sharing traumatic experiences is also part of the healing process, as it helps the sufferers to make sense of what has happened to them. In the case of Indochinese refugees, many of them share their traumatic memories of war and communist persecution in the forms of narratives to cope with trauma and those narratives become part of Asian American literature. Since those stories portray traumatic experiences of Indochinese refugees, they are considered trauma narratives. According to Pederson (2018, 97), there is a long relationship between trauma and narratives and it is widely accepted that telling stories behind trauma is needed for recovery. It is also suggested that literary narratives regarding trauma offer a privileged “value for communicating [...] deepest psychic pains”. For the trauma narratives of Indochinese refugees in the United States, they are regarded as part of Asian American literature, communicating the pains of those refugees. In a way, those narratives can be read as what Cheung (1997) calls a bridge to connect America with Asia, since they provide understanding of how their people come to be subjects of the United States. In addition, those narratives, whether they are novels, memoirs or autobiographies, imply that Indochinese refugees come to the United States by force, not by their own will. Since the United States took prominent part in the war in Indochina which instigated the diaspora of those refugees, the American citizens should also understand their situations and thus not treat them with racist ideology.

This study aims to investigate trauma narratives which serve as collective memories of Indochinese refugees in the United States. The scope of study covers three primary texts by Southeast Asian American authors including:

1. *Monkey Bridge* (1997), a novel by Lan Cao, a Vietnamese American author.
2. *Golden Bones: An Extraordinary Journey from Hell in Cambodia to a New Life in America* (2008) (afterwards will be referred as *Golden Bones*), a memoir by Sichan Siv, a Cambodian American author.
3. *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (1994) (afterwards will be referred as *Hmong Means Free*), a collection of short memoirs of Hmong Americans from Laos, edited by Sucheng Chan.

Through the investigation of the primary texts, this study explores how their writers share the traumatic memories and how those memories affect their life in the United States. Those traumatic memories are regarded as collective memories of all Indochinese immigrants in the United States, since they emerged from the same historical context. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), a collective memory refers to “shared recollection: mental representations of past events that are common to members of a social group”. For example, the refugees from a great war in a country may collectively remember the brutality of that war differently, compared with the memory of the general public on the same war. That is to say, other groups cannot remember or understand a situation as much as the group who directly experiences it. A group of people can express their collective memories in different forms, such as oral or written narratives, monuments or other objects which represent their memory and also commemorative rituals or practices. These forms of collective memories serve various functions, such as teaching, forming and sustaining relationships, being part of identity or even entertaining. A collective memory is also referred to as a cultural memory and a social memory.

The authors of the trauma narratives in *Monkey Bridge*, *Golden Bones* and *Hmong Means Free*, despite their different countries of origins, have survived the Indochina War and communist persecution in this region before being resettled in the United States. It is clear that they share collective memories of those events through their first-hand experiences. As evident in the three books, the authors recount their traumatic experiences in witnessing massive deaths, suffering from losses and struggling to survive the diasporic journeys. Therefore, it can be said that their collective memories are formed by the traumatic experiences which cannot be eradicated, even though they relocate to the United States and start a

new life. Their experiences are transformed into trauma narratives which explain how they become American citizens.

Literature by Indochinese refugees creates more diversity to Asian American literature. In fact, according to Lowe (1996), literature by authors from Southeast Asia, especially the post-1975 refugees, brings a new voice to the existing Asian American literature, which are dominated by Chinese and Japanese American authors and refutes the idea of the homogeneity of Asian Americans by white Americans who view them as one group with no different identities. Writing by different ethnic groups of Asian Americans indicates that this group of people are diverse, coming from different backgrounds and contexts. Regarding the authors of the primary texts in this study, with their collective memories constituting their distinctive identity, it is clear that they should be viewed differently from other groups of Asians in the United States. Especially, when considering the role of the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, the American public should understand why this nation has become the main destination of Indochinese refugees and treat them with more understanding. In the following sections, each of the primary texts, as trauma narratives and collective memories, is discussed to explore the experiences of the main characters as representation of Indochinese refugees.

Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997)

Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* is a novel set in both Vietnam and the United States, narrated through the memories of two main characters, Mai and Thanh. Mai is sent to the United States a few days before the fall of Saigon and later Thanh, her mother, reunites with her in this new world. This novel is highly historicised, as the author employs many historical events during the Vietnam War as significant components of the story. Experiencing the brutality of war and the communist regime, the two characters have inevitably become traumatised subjects on the American land, where they also suffer from racial discrimination.

In fact, Vietnamese American literature was the first group among its counterparts from Southeast Asia, which emerged in the American literary canon. Most literary works in this genre recount painful memories of their authors who have been through destructive conflicts leading to war and persecution. As Truong (1997, 219) puts it, "Emerging out of social and historical moments of military conflict, Vietnamese American literature speaks of death and other irreconcilable losses and longs always for peace—peace of mind". Not only is Vietnamese American literature constituted by military conflicts, but it also derives from political persecution by the communist regime. This characteristic of Vietnamese American

literature can be seen in Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, since the readers will encounter the brutality of both war and communist persecution through the main characters' narratives.

As portrayed in the story, the main characters' trauma is caused by both the Americans and the communists or the Vietcong who are referred to as the day ghosts and the night ghosts respectively. The way Cao refers to these people as ghosts suggests that in her perspective both of these groups are not welcomed by people in Vietnam, since they are considered causes of the ruin of their homeland. Americans, referred to as day ghosts, come during the daytime and propagate ideas of modernity. They bring modern items, such as stoves, soaps and candies to Vietnamese villagers: "They were going from house to house, handing out goodwill: free modern stoves that were supposed to emit much less smoke than the ones we villagers had been using" (Cao 1997, 238). Americans also learn Vietnamese ways and try to assimilate into the tradition of Vietnamese people in order to win their hearts, as Thanh writes to her daughter, "They had learned to bow the Vietnamese way and immediately gave your grandmother a deep and respectful bow when they came by her house" (Cao 1997, 238). However, the real purpose of the Americans is to be accepted by the Vietnamese before instilling the anti-communist ideology in their hearts, which will lead to their victory over the Vietcong.

The American day ghosts are competed against by the Vietcong, who are referred to as the night ghosts, since they come to the village during the nighttime to disseminate the communist ideology to the villagers, as explained in the story:

[T]he Vietcong too began their sundown visits, like swarms of invisible fleas, the very minute the day ghosts, as the Americans were called, left the village for the night. And suddenly there were Vietcong study sessions we were forced to attend and fund drives we had to contribute to. (Cao 1997, 239)

It is clear that the Vietcong also aims to gain support from the villagers in order to win the war. However, they do not have material offerings like the Americans, but they offer dreams of a better life if they can transform the country into a communist one. However, since Cao uses the term "night ghosts" to refer to the Vietcong, it is clear that, to her, these people also bring nightmares to Vietnamese people, which are developed to be their trauma. In fact, both the day ghosts and the night ghosts inflict haunting memories on their psyche both day and night.

The war between the day ghosts and the night ghosts is an important root of the main characters' trauma, since they have to abandon their homeland to seek refuge. That is to say, they lose their homeland where their memories are buried. Although Mai leaves Vietnam before the fall of Saigon, she unavoidably witnesses great destruction of her homeland. In the United States, she still suffers from trauma when the picture of the ruined country emerges in her imagination, as she explains:

Cluster bombs left a trail of feathered smoke in the sky, while aerial helicopters wove in and out of the clouds like desperate dragonflies. Armored tanks, steel-treaded, thundered through the capital city. The country would have no choice but to stand still and take the bullets. Saigon, I almost smelled, was soaked in an inexhaustible odor of burnt chemicals, reminiscent of the dizzying outrush of heat and dust and smoke I had witnessed during the Tet New Year seven years before. (Cao 1997, 98)

Depicting the scene, Cao suggests that Vietnamese people—no matter if they decide to stay in their country or to become refugees—inevitably share the memory of war which never fades away. The Americans, who claim to bring modernity and to free Vietnam from the communist, take a significant part in inflicting traumatic memories on Vietnamese people. As evident in the story, in order to defeat the communist, the United States army deploys various military tactics, which also destroys Vietnam in many aspects. For example, Cao explains that the Americans often burn forests and rice fields in search for the Vietcong:

In their final and deadliest charge yet, the elephants [the Americans] rolled out their drum after drum painted with orange stripes and sprayed our crops overnight with a special kind of poison, a mixture so powerful that it could command even the most majestic of trees to prematurely drop their leaves [...] and turn the green of our rice fields into the dead dead brown of stone. (Cao 1997, 244)

The excerpt indicates that all rice fields are destroyed by poisonous chemicals and as a result the villagers will not have rice, their staple food, for consumption. More terribly, the farmers cannot regrow the rice, since the land is depleted and contaminated with poison: “the village soil remained dull and dead, an ungenerous gray that could keep raw ashes smoldering and hot but could neither keep nor sustain life” (Cao 1997, 245). According to history, the United States “deployed an aerial arsenal comprising dumb bombs, guided bombs and missiles, air explosive devices, napalm and the defoliant ‘Agent Orange’” (Clapson 2019, 156). These highly destructive weapons, especially the Agent Orange, turn the rice fields to be dry, depleted land on which nothing can grow. Vietnam is a country with a long

history of rice culture. Therefore, when their rice and land are destroyed, the rice culture is interrupted. Without rice, Vietnamese people suffer more from famine and poverty which amplify their trauma.

Apart from the examples, there are also other incidents and scenes in *Monkey Bridge* which indicate that Cao aims to present her main characters, Mai and Thanh, as traumatised subjects. Thanh, in particular, seems to suffer more than Mai, as she also has to survive the war between the Vietnamese nationalists and the Japanese colonizers before the Vietcong rise to power. In other words, she has experienced and endured more catastrophic events than Mai. In the United States, she suffers from recurring nightmares and other depressing symptoms which indicate that she cannot get rid of the traumatic memories which lead to her death. It is true that she has a strong bond with her homeland, but due to her traumatic experience, she never wishes to return to Vietnam after moving to the United States, as she says, "I hope I'll never have to go back there again" (Cao 1997, 138). It can be said that Thanh is caught between two worlds. In the United States, she cannot adjust herself to the new environment and cope with trauma. At the same time, she suffers from her traumatic memories in Vietnam and does not want to revisit those memories in her homeland.

In fact, Cao constructs *Monkey Bridge* as a conversation between different memories of Mai and Thanh, which they carry with them to the United States. Those memories become obstacles for both of them to rebuild their lives. The memories of these two characters are intertwined, forming a complete novel to tell stories of war, losses and trauma of Vietnamese Americans. Mai and Thanh successfully escape from war and the communist regime which takes over the country after the fall of Saigon, but they cannot escape from their past. The stories of Mai and Thanh suggest that Vietnamese refugees have to grapple with traumatic memories as a result of war and its aftermath. As for Cao, the author of *Monkey Bridge* who escaped from her home country, she employs collective memories of Vietnamese refugees to reveal how those people suffer even after they leave their homeland.

Sichan Siv's *Golden Bones* (2008)

When the communist rose to power in the second half of the 1970s, not only Vietnam, but also Cambodia and Laos fell to communism. Cambodia, in particular, has a tragic history under the Khmer Rouge (the term used to refer to the communist in Cambodia), which caused at least 1.5 million Cambodians to die. Similar to the communist regime in Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge claimed to employ the communist ideology in moving Cambodia towards classless, utopian society. However, instead

of improving the quality of life of Cambodians as they propagated, the Khmer Rouge committed a great crime against humanity, destroying people's lives and devastating the country. The majority of Cambodians dramatically suffered from the atrocity of this totalitarian regime. Sichan Siv's *Golden Bones* is a trauma narrative which portrays horrible experiences of its author during that period. An autobiography, this book serves as a realistic narrative revealing the traumatic life of Siv who decides to take a perilous journey to escape from the Khmer Rouge to a refugee camp in Thailand before being transferred to the United States. The journey of Siv, from the period before the civil war in Cambodia until the time he crosses the Cambodian-Thai border and is admitted to a refugee camp in Thailand, articulates great suffering of Cambodian people whose humanity is robbed by the totalitarian regime in their country. Similar to Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, which serves as a collective memory of Vietnamese Americans, Siv's *Golden Bones*, is considered a collective memory of Cambodian Americans.

In Siv's autobiography, after the Khmer Rouge rules Cambodia, it aims to destroy the class system and create equality in society. This regime views upper-class Cambodians and Western people as the most important culprit of poverty and social degradation in Cambodia. In the eyes of the Khmer Rouge, those people are corrupt and they spend the money from corruption on extravagant lifestyles adopted from Western culture. To improve the nation, the Khmer Rouge sees that those people must be exterminated, as Siv (2008, 133) explains in the story that the Khmer Rouge "did their best to 'cleanse' the landscape of the educated middle class and to replace it with a utopian agrarian society that would be free of 'western imperialism and corruption'". Based on history, after the Khmer Rouge had gained victory and took control over the country, the first mission they undertook was to get rid of all military officers and other officials serving the previous government. At the same time, they searched for middle class and upper-class people and killed or evacuated them to labour camps. As stated by the historian Etcheson (2005, 7), "Anyone with any education, even wearing eyeglasses, was considered a class enemy and was vulnerable to summary execution". The Khmer Rouge condemned those who had education as the privileged group in society and such privilege was derived from corruption or exploitation of working-class people.

In the case of Siv and his family, they belong to the middle class and his father used to be a police officer of the previous government. With this background, the Khmer Rouge captures and sends them to a slave labour camp, where they are turned to be labourers to drive the policy of collectivisation, which the Khmer Rouge believes that it will transform Cambodia to be a utopian society. Siv describes that the routine work in the camp is extremely hard. For example, all inmates have to get up before dawn and walk for one hour to a forced-labour site.

At least 5,000 labourers are working on a dam construction project: “The sound of a drum started the working day even before the first ray of sunlight hit us. We were given only hoes and baskets. We formed ant-like rows and passed the baskets of soil from one person to another” (Siv 2008, 104). Inmates in the labour camp have to endure hard work. In fact, after they are evacuated to the camp, it is clear that they lose their home and freedom. For Siv, besides suffering from being a forced labourer, he also lacks security in life. Learning about the extermination of upper-class people, he realises his profile—as a well-educated person who used to work for the Royal Air Cambodge, a transnational company—can bring danger to his family. He explains in the book that “I was college-educated. I was a teacher. I had worked for the capitalists and imperialists. I had all the qualifications to be immediately eliminated. Thus, I felt insecure; my presence could jeopardize everyone else” (Siv 2008, 105). Knowing about the serious harm he can bring to his family, he decides to escape from the camp, heading to the Thai-Cambodian border. Doing so, he believes that the rest of his family will be safer.

Based on history, under the Khmer Rouge regime, a great number of middle- and upper-class Cambodians were slaughtered since they were viewed as corrupt and accused of oppressing the poor. As discussed by Hinton (2005, 46), “Khmer Rouge leaders directly and indirectly called for their followers to take vengeance upon the ‘class enemies’ who had formerly oppressed them”. The class enemies in this excerpt referred to officials working for the previous government and those who are associated with the French and American imperialists. The Americans, in particular, were considered great enemies, since they supported the previous government who killed a large number of communists and other Cambodians during the anti-communist war. For instance, as a result of the Americans’ bombing of the communist trails, about 150,000 Cambodian civilians were killed (Hinton 2005). For these reasons, the Khmer Rouge developed great hatred towards their class enemies and sought vengeance against them. In *Golden Bones*, Siv can be executed immediately if the Khmer Rouge discovers that he used to work for the previous government and a transnational company.

After Siv leaves his family and escapes from the first labour camp, he decides to change his identity for safety reasons. He throws away his glasses because he knows that they are a sign of education: “I could not be an educated person” (Siv 2008, 111). In addition, since his name, Sichan, is a common name used by upper-class people, he has to fake his name to be Sok Chan, a name of lower-class people. When the Khmer Rouge asks about his job, he answers, “*I was a taxi and bus driver*” (Siv 2008, 112, emphasis in original). He has to lie and conceal his true identity to ensure safety. In fact, he used to work for the previous government

and a commercial airline, but this truth will certainly bring harm to himself. In this situation, faking identity and masking himself as a lower-class person seems to be the safest way to bring him to a refugee camp in Thailand.

The yearn for safety and survival is part of collective memories of Cambodian refugees. Siv, in particular, learns about the brutality of the Khmer Rouge soldiers who are instilled with the virtue of killing, so they can kill the so-called enemies without any feeling of guilt. As stated by Hinton (2005, 215), during that period, those soldiers wanted acceptance among themselves and killing was seen as a way to gain it: “killing enemies became an honourable thing to do”. Such killing added to the number of dead people who died from hard work, starvation and diseases. This high number of deaths made this event the holocaust in Cambodia. In Siv’s (2008, 102) autobiography, the memory of gruesome scenes he witnesses while escaping to Thailand is poignantly inscribed:

Charred cars and trucks were everywhere. More and more people died along the roads that seemed to lead nowhere. They died of hardship, exhaustion and summary executions by the Khmer Rouge. We saw decomposing bodies with arms tied behind their backs. One had the throat slit open. One had a big black mark at the back of the neck. A woman had her baby still at her breast.

The genocide of Cambodians as elaborated in the excerpt indicates that the Khmer Rouge systematically exterminates its class enemies who oppress and exploit the working-class people. This mass killing becomes a holocaust in Southeast Asia, in which those in power persecute people of the same race simply because they are condemned enemies. Based on history, approximately 1.5 million people, which was about one-third of Cambodian population, died from this genocide. In the case of Siv, he is lucky enough to reach a refugee camp in Thailand before being transferred to the United States. Unfortunately, he learns later that all his family members perish in the killing field in Cambodia. According to the gruesome scenes and the horrible memories he depicts in his autobiography, it is clear that this book is a trauma narrative, in which Cambodia is referred to as hell: “Cambodia was slowly turning into a land of blood and tears. It was becoming *noruork knong lok*, a hell on earth” (Siv 2008, 102). Siv successfully escapes from the Cambodian genocide, but he cannot escape from trauma as the aftermath of his horrible experiences. Not only does this trauma recur in his imagination, but it also repeatedly appears in his writing.

Siv's *Golden Bones* is regarded as a collective memory of Cambodian refugees in the United States, as it reminds themselves of their shared experiences including communist persecution, losses and journeys to this new world. In addition, this book helps define the identity of Cambodian Americans and provides more understanding of their background to the public. For Siv, despite his great success in the United States, as he became a United States ambassador in the United Nations and a deputy assistant to President George W. Bush and his autobiography is an international bestselling published by HarperCollins, he still cannot overcome the profound trauma as shown in his narrative.

Sucheng Chan's *Hmong Means Free* (1994)

Hmong Means Free is a collection of short memoirs of Hmong refugees who escaped from the communist persecution in Laos during the second half of the 1970s, after the fall of Saigon and the retreat of the United States army from Indochina. In fact, among the Indochinese refugees, Hmong people are regarded as those who have the longest journey of diaspora. As elaborated in the introduction of *Hmong Means Free*, this ethnic group of people originally lived in the Southern part of China in the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou and Hunan. Since they were severely oppressed by the Chinese, they fled the country and moved to some highland areas of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand (Chan 1994). During the Vietnam War, the United States operated a secret war in Laos, although this country was declared a war-free country. To carry on this mission, the United States hired Hmong people as mercenaries to fight the communists. As stated by Chan (1994, 30), the Hmong people agreed to fight for the Americans under the agreement that "if the Hmong should suffer defeat, then the Americans would 'find a new place' where they could help the Hmong". Helping the American side, the Hmong people were seen by the communists as enemies and "traitors to the communist revolution" (Fong 2008, 30). Therefore, when the United States army retreated, the Hmong people became targets of extermination by the communists who rose to power. To survive, they abandoned their homes, trekked through mountains and jungles, crossed the Mekong River and sought shelters at the refugee camps in Thailand. Their treacherous journeys and horrible experiences written by different authors were collected, edited and published through *Hmong Means Free*, a trauma narrative of Hmong Americans.

As portrayed in most narratives in this book, the majority of the Hmong refugees take their diasporic journeys from Laos to the refugee camps in Thailand before being transported to the United States. Those narratives share a similar pattern, starting from their life in Laos to the communist war, the escape from the communist regime, life in the refugee camps and new life in the United States. Apart from the

portrayal of their diasporic journeys, those narratives also depict Hmong distinctive culture and other issues, such as economic conditions in the Hmong community, gender hierarchy and the oppression from the lowland mainstream Lao people. Nevertheless, this article focuses on their journeys and life in the refugee camps, revealing that like the Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, Hmong people in the United States suffer greatly from profound trauma. Their trauma narratives serve as collective memories of Hmong Americans.

As portrayed in *Hmong Means Free*, since Laos is a landlocked country which does not border any sea, the most possible way for most Hmong refugees to escape from the communist regime is to trek through mountains and jungles before crossing the Mekong River to Thailand. During the journey they have to be cautious of the communist attack and at the same time undergo other harsh conditions, such as starvation, illness and fatigue. Since the Hmong refugees have encountered hardship and so much danger, their experiences during the journey become a significant element of their narratives, recurring in most of the stories compiled in *Hmong Means Free*. The communist attack seems to be the most threatening danger for most of the refugees, since the communist soldiers are equipped with totalitarian authority to kill any Hmong, especially those who try to escape. The brutality of the communists, who can emerge at any moment in the jungle, provokes great fear in all refugees. To assure their safety, silence is one of the top priorities they must keep while trekking. The need for silence causes some tragic stories to those who travel with little children who are difficult to control and always cry. Many times, parents need to abuse their children in order to stop them from crying. In “Surviving the Storms”, Thek Moua recounts his traumatic journey in which he witnesses violence against little children whose parents are forced to silence them. Children who cannot stop crying are given opium and those who are overdosed are dead. This incident becomes a traumatic experience Thek Moua cannot avoid:

These poor children looked as though the blood in their arteries and veins had become clotted. Their hearts began to beat more and more slowly until they stopped. Some of the children vomited blood and within seconds, their bodies became as cold as ice. Young babies especially, died instantaneously. (Chan 1994, 226)

This heart-wrenching incident happens, since those children do not stop crying due to hunger, fatigue, fear and missing home. The only option that the parents have is to feed them opium. In fact, those parents are well aware of the harmful effects of opium, but they need to ensure the group’s security. They cannot allow their children’s crying to lead the communists to the group and arrest or even kill other group members.

Silencing children by using opium seems to be a common method used by Hmong refugees, since this incident appears in other narratives as well. For example, in “An Unforgettable Journey”, Maijue Xiong describes that safety is the first priority during the journey to the refugee camps in Thailand and the method is mentioned in this narrative: “Many parents feared the Communist soldiers would hear the cries of their young children; therefore, they drugged the children with opium to keep them quiet. Some parents even left those children who would not stop crying behind” (Chan 1994, 119). Similar to Thek in the previous narrative, Maijue has to experience the traumatic event elaborated in this excerpt. Based on history, opium was a major cash crop of Hmong people in Laos and they took it with them during their journey. At home, they grew rice and corn for family consumption and produced opium for their income (Chan 1994). Through the two narratives, it is suggested that the parents who drug their children with opium are also afraid that they will be left behind by the group. Without enough knowledge about the harm of opium, they take a slim chance to silence their children with the hope that they will be able to get over its effects.

Another important traumatic memory shared by the Hmong refugees apart from the tragic stories is hunger during the journey. This issue recurs in many stories in *Hmong Means Free*. Most refugees suffer from food shortage, since they cannot carry enough supplies with them while escaping; carrying more supplies means more burdens hindering their journey. This situation exacerbates the horrible conditions they are encountering. In Vu Pao Tcha’s “A New America”, for example, the refugees run out of rice and other food supplies, so they suffer greatly from hunger and have to find something to fill their stomachs:

To satisfy our hunger, we had to feed on roots, leaves, fruits and other edible plants we found in the jungle. [...] Although some of us suffered from hunger and sickness, we never stopped to rest or sleep. We continued walking even when it rained. We did not want to be caught by soldiers and taken back to Laos. (Chan 1994, 193)

Hunger directly affects the body, as it reduces the physical strength and ability to function. However, those Hmong refugees cannot allow this physical condition to stop them because they know that the only chance to survive is to reach the destination in Thailand. In the mental aspect, hunger can cause trauma and such trauma can be their collective memory, since most of the Hmong refugees experience and suffer from it. As stated by Waite and Thielke (2021), hunger can result in mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, or even post-traumatic stress disorder. Although the effect of hunger on the mind is less visible

than on the body, it can be as devastating. For the Hmong refugees, as the issue of hunger recurs in their narratives, it is clear that it has become part of their traumatic experience and memory.

Another important memory of Hmong refugees as portrayed in *Hmong Means Free* is the experience of crossing the Mekong River to the refugee camps in Thailand. Those who are lucky to have enough money hire boats to carry them to Thailand. Unfortunately, those who cannot afford to hire a boat have to swim across the river, risking their lives in fighting against the strong tide. As depicted in Pang Yang's narrative, many Hmong refugees die while trying to swim across the river:

They were either shot by Communist troops or the Thai shore patrol or drowned while trying to swim across when the current was too strong. Some people bought rubber tubes from Lao or Thai merchants to help them swim across the river safely. But some were unlucky: they were caught between the bullets flying from both shores. (Chan 1994, 220)

This excerpt not only shows that the journey of the Hmong refugees is perilous, but also indicates that the Hmong people are among the most marginalised groups. They move from China to Laos and then they have to escape from communists in Laos to Thailand. Being caught in the middle of the Mekong River, they are clearly unwanted by both Laos and Thailand. While communists in Laos hate them because they help the Americans to fight in the war, the Thai patrol does not want them to come to Thailand since they view that the Hmong refugees can be a problem for the country. This situation suggests that the Hmong people are both homeless and hopeless.

The Hmong refugees who manage to cross the Mekong River and are admitted to the refugee camps in Thailand also share another important traumatic memory. Life at the camps is miserable and the refugees still need to struggle for survival on a daily basis. The shelters are not enough for the high number of refugees, so they are crammed into small areas. On top of that, food is never enough for them, so hunger becomes a serious problem in the camps, as explained in Vue Vang's narrative:

Each family, regardless of how large or small it was, was put into one room. Every two weeks, trucks brought vegetables, fish, eggs and rice to the camp. The food was given to two representatives from each apartment complex, who then divided it among the families. Each person was allocated a certain amount of rice, vegetables and meat. Although we were grateful for this free food, we never had enough to eat. (Chan 1994, 114)

When people are hungry, they try to fill their stomachs. Especially for children, hunger can cause them to develop certain behaviours. For example, Vue Pao Tcha states in his narrative that he suffers greatly from hunger during his journey and even after he is admitted to a camp, hunger is never gone. When hunger is intolerable, he has to steal food to satisfy it:

Hunger was so common in the refugee camp that I got used to it. However, I would sometimes find myself staring at some kids who were fortunate enough to have a piece of doughnut in their hands. The thought of stealing crossed my mind many times. Eventually, I did steal. (Chan 1994, 195)

For children, persistent hunger can result in trauma later in their life, especially when they need to commit a crime to get food like in the excerpt. Vue Pao Tcha is caught stealing food and severely beaten by his parents because he brings great humiliation to the family. Such punishment becomes a wound in his mind which never heals. In fact, stealing is quite common among children in the refugee camps, since they need food to alleviate their hunger, as Vu Pao states, “Many hungry children would do whatever they could to satisfy their stomachs” (Chan 1994, 196). Hunger is obviously a shared experience among Hmong refugees, so it appears in many of their narratives which were written after their settlement in the United States. It can be said that this form of suffering serves as part of their collective memories well understood among their own group.

In addition to the traumatic experiences, *Hmong Means Free* also reveals other horrible conditions which Hmong refugees have to endure in the camps. For example, a lack of sanitation causes many illnesses, while doctors are not adequately provided. In addition, schools are not provided for Hmong children in the camps until the very last years of the refugee crisis. Hmong refugees have to suffer from these conditions for many years before they are transferred to the United States and some other countries. When they reach their destinations, they also encounter racial oppression in many forms. Many racist Americans also exclude them from their society and tell them to go back where they belong. These painful experiences indicate that the memoirs in this book are in fact trauma narratives stemming from collective memories of Hmong American people who are considered by-products of the Vietnam War. While the word “Hmong” means “free” in their language, unfortunately they are never free from severe oppression and traumatic memories.

Based on the discussion of the three books, their authors, as representation of Indochinese refugees in the United States, share the same pattern of how they constitute their Asian American identity. Their narratives indicate that their

trauma stems from the loss of their homelands and families, persecution from the communist regimes and perilous journeys to the new world. Despite their different genres (Cao's *Monkey Bridge* as a novel, Siv's *Golden Bones* as an autobiography and Chan's *Hmong Means Free* as a collection of short memoirs), they serve the same function, revealing traumatic memories of Indochinese refugees. Those people are successfully resettled in the United States, but they cannot eradicate their traumatic memories from the psyche, which are transformed to be the trauma narratives. These narratives also suggest that their authors yearn for a voice to share their traumatic memories. This is in the same vein as Herman (1997) and Pederson (2018), who argue that telling traumatic stories can help the victims to cope with their trauma. The process of telling stories can help the victims to make sense of what has happened to them and to communicate their psychic pains with others. The trauma narratives discussed in this study are also part of contemporary American trauma narratives as a whole. According to Gibbs (2014), during the late 20th century, the trauma narratives as a paradigm spread across American culture. This is because the United States is a place where different groups of trauma sufferers, such as holocaust survivors and veterans from different wars, exist together. Indochinese refugees' narratives, especially in this study, have become part of this tradition, reaffirming that American culture is partially constituted by trauma.

Conclusion

The trauma narratives in Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, Siv's *Golden Bones* and Chan's *Hmong Means Free*, reflect collective memories of Indochinese refugees in the United States. It is clear that the authors of those narratives desire to share their traumatic experiences with readers, so that those readers will gain insight into their background and understand how they come to be Asian Americans. As forms of collective memories, those narratives also help to foster the relationship between members of the group. Those collective memories promote the sense of belonging to their communities in the United States because they remind the community members of their diasporic roots and identity. In addition, since they are written narratives, they will exist for the later generations to learn about their pasts which constitute their present. As stated by Roediger and DeSoto (2016) a collective memory is about how different groups of people remember their pasts. Each person will have a kind of collective memory regarding the social group he or she belongs to. In addition, as discussed earlier, the group members will remember their pasts differently from people outside the group. The Americans might remember the Vietnam War in a way that it brought shame and losses to the country, but the Indochinese refugees remember it as an origin of their trauma. In the case of the authors of the narratives in the selected three books, they remember their pasts

in different forms of trauma caused by the loss of homelands, persecution by the communist regime and perilous journeys to escape from their countries. Such trauma becomes an important part of their identity, so it inevitably emerges in their narratives. In addition, by reading those narratives, the Americans should understand that Indochinese refugees suffer greatly from trauma caused by the war between the United States and the communists, so they should embrace those refugees as well as their descendants with more empathy.

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