

# The U.S. War On Vietnam

## Reflection on a Refugee Journey

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2020

a review of

*Among the Boat People: A Memoir of Vietnam* by Nhi Manh Chung. Autonomedia 2019 [autonomedia.org](http://autonomedia.org)

“When wars are over, people only want to know who won, what exciting battles took place, and all that military idiocy. People never know what the innocent victims have to say.”

—poet and artist Yuko Otomo

The era of the 1960s and early 1970s was an inspiring time for many radicals in the U.S. as elsewhere. Militarism and racism, along with other forms of hierarchy, were being massively opposed by the civil rights, anti-war (including G.I. resistance), feminist and student movements, opening up possibilities for a larger social transformation.

While radical optimism prevailed in this country, the U.S. war waged against Vietnam resulted in the death of millions of Indochinese, the devastation of the Land, and an intensified brutalization of social life.

In the first two decades after the 1975 U.S. military withdrawal, millions of people fled Vietnam in the face of Communist government repression combined with extreme economic difficulties. Very many were eventually given refuge in the U.S., Canada, France and other countries.

The author was among the thousands who boarded decrepit and overloaded boats to escape. The approximately 800,000 who survived these dangerous voyages, along with thousands who did not, became known as the boat people.

This book tells Nhi Chung’s story along with the stories of other refugees whose lives touched hers.

She describes a diversity of people she has met, some like herself from the Chinese minority, some from the countryside, some from the city, some the children of Vietnamese women and U.S. soldiers, some from formerly well off families such as her own, and others quite poor.

Chung relates several abortive escapes, followed by a harrowing voyage she and others undertook through stormy seas in rickety, overcrowded boats, rotten food and rancid water, robbery and rapes by pirates, boat sinkings and drownings, and being turned away from several countries.

Finally, the group of refugees came upon an American oil drilling platform where the workers helped them to contact the Red Cross, find temporary refuge in Malaysia, and begin the process of applying for asylum in countries that might accept them.

She arrived in the U.S. in 1979. Her narrative then covers many of the challenges she and other refugees faced, including learning to navigate a new culture and build new lives, as well as some wonderful examples of social solidarity and love by new friends, neighbors, coworkers and even a few strangers.

Chung’s multifaceted, complex descriptions of the shaping of her own life and those of the other refugees and immigrants she has known from a variety of backgrounds challenge stereotypes. Her narrative addresses themes that are still relevant today.

They include the different reasons people migrate, differences in economic and social circumstances of people before and after, and the different ways they may be viewed in U.S. society based on physical characteristics, such as skin color.

This specificity can contribute to greater understanding of the situations of those currently coming here in ways that inspire respect, empathy and concrete solidarity.

Although the book does not focus on political ideas, it makes clear that the personal experiences of refugees are strongly shaped by the authoritarian politics of domination both in the countries they are fleeing and the places they resettle.

Today, the world is in desperate need of new ideas beyond the narrow possibilities of the nation-state system. The stories in *Among the Boat People* can contribute to the understanding necessary for abolishing borders and breaking down hierarchies to create a more cooperative and compassionate world, centered in mutual aid, self-management, voluntary association, horizontality, decentralization and solidarity.

Wendy Wildflower is a longtime friend of the *Fifth Estate*.

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