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Book Review

Glen L. Hendricks, Bruce T. Downing, Amos S. Deinard, editors
The Hmong in Transition
Staten Island: New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1986

by John Van Esterik

This collection of papers on Hmong refugees is the product of a conference held at the University of Minnesota in 1983. Despite international contributions, Hmong refugees are viewed largely from an American perspective. Canadian readers, however, can learn a great deal about Hmong society in terms of language training, health care, and adaptation.

The first of four parts is prefaced by an introduction on the meaning of culture and tradition. Culture is always undergoing dynamic change and Hmong culture is no exception. The first three papers take into account the nature of the dynamics of culture in adaptation, economic factors in refugee exodus, and processes of identity maintenance. This section concludes with a revealing and useful discussion of geomancy among the Hmong and its place in Hmong interethnic relations.

Part two addresses the adaptation of the Hmong refugees to the United States. This part includes five individual papers plus a section on a symposium that reports on an Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) study of Hmong adaptation in the United States.

Included is a report on training programmes in Minnesota for Hmong women that seek to place women in entry level menial sewing and cleaning jobs, a practice that will inevitably create a disadvantaged group of women. Another discussion of the resolution of a case of sexual assault in one Hmong community is ethnographically rich and sensitive. A paper on patrons and clients in a Hmong needlework cooperative does not give reference to the growing literature on patron-client patterns among Southeast Asian refugees.

A summary overview of an ORR study reports that the population is growing, Hmong students are experiencing difficulties in schools, welfare dependency is high, and employment projects have not had great success.

Part three concentrates on Hmong linguistics and this population's acquisition of English. Part four, on health-care issues, emphasizes that professionals in this field should be aware of differing cultural attitudes among refugee groups to health care and to western medical practices. Included is an excellent discussion of Hmong shamanism as a form of psychotherapy. Guidelines for the mental-health professional dealing with Hmong refugees follow. Hmong terminology, beliefs, traditional healers, symptomatic descriptions that may be provided by Hmong patients, and various cross-cultural problems are outlined. This is an essential compendium for any health-care worker among Hmong in North America.

Research on the sudden death syndrome among Hmong and other Southeast Asians and papers on maternal-child links and undue lead absorption among Hmong children are included in this section.

This important if somewhat dated (1983) reader can be used by scholars, service providers, health care workers, and other interested individuals to learn about Hmong culture, adaptation, language, and health-care beliefs and problems.

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