

SHIRA SEBBAN, *Vietnam's Modern Day Boat People: Bridging Borders for Freedom*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2024. 236 pages, 85 photos, appendices, notes, bibliography and index, \$39.95. ISBN 9-781-4766-8537-3 (pb)

It has been more than a decade since Australia introduced its ruthless pushback policies for maritime asylum seekers, which it in fact continues to enforce. Instead of deciding the asylum claims of intercepted boat people in Australia, more often than not maritime asylum seekers are returned to the countries from which they fled without being allowed to set foot on Australian soil. During these pushbacks little to no thought seems to be given to the safety or wellbeing of the passengers once they are handed over the authorities of their home country. Australian government representatives continue to justify this cruel approach by the need to combat the transnational people-smuggling industry.

While the general outcome for the mobility of asylum seekers has become clear – they are now stuck elsewhere and need to find safety in countries other than Australia – one often forgets about the tremendous misery endured by the individuals who have been targeted by Australia's pushback policies. Through a meticulous retracing of one family's flight from Vietnam, a country with a history of producing maritime refugees, and the nearly seven years' journey that followed, Shira Sebban provides a much-needed account of the human downside of Australia's "success" in turning away asylum seekers. More importantly, perhaps, the fact that the family's escape was organised not by any transnational operating criminal network but by the passengers themselves, after selling everything they ever owned, also undercuts Australia's claim to be targeting the people smuggling industry.

Vietnam's Modern Day Boat People is a vigilantly researched account of what happened to Mrs. Loan, her husband and their four children, who set out in March 2015 by boat to seek asylum but were intercepted by Australian forces and returned to Vietnam against their will. The initial reasons for leaving Vietnam had been threefold, as Catholics Mrs. Loan and her family face ongoing discrimination, but maybe more importantly, Mrs. Loan had lost a piece of land she owned previously due to state confiscation that is not uncommon in Vietnam. Having lost an important means of making a living due the loss of land, the economic situation of the family got worse when her husband who worked as a fisherman was attacked and robbed by Chinese naval forces after fishing in the highly disputed area of the Spratley and Paracel Islands, in the South Chinese Sea. Despite having allegedly been promised no retribution, the parents were both arrested and convicted for their attempt to escape from Vietnam. The threatened imprisonment of Mrs. Loan left her four children at risk of being sent to an orphanage for years to come.

Alerted by a newspaper article about the family's failed escape, Shira Sebban, a middle-aged woman from Sydney who is, herself, the descendant of Jewish refugees, felt an urge to intervene. In a remarkably short time, she managed to set up a system of support for the family in Vietnam and their lawyer, as well as for some other Vietnamese asylum seekers whom the Australian border forces had returned to Vietnam around the same time. In this regard, the book is a convincing testament to civil engagement, crowd funding and the power of solidarity across borders. Yet, the story doesn't end there.

With her prison sentenced temporarily postponed in order to care for her children, Mrs. Loan undertakes a second attempt to escape from Vietnam. After a perilous journey, the family lands in Indonesia, where they are – like many before them – detained for an extended period in a prison-like detention centre. Unlike many other asylum seekers in Indonesia, however, the Vietnamese family is accorded refugee status by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in Jakarta in record time. Needless to say, the fact that Mrs. Loan and her family were found to be refugees who could not be deported to Vietnam, due to their well-founded fears, shows how superficial the procedure conducted by the Australian authorities during the interception at sea must have been.

Given that integration into the local society is not an option for refugees in Indonesia as Indonesia does not allow this, their only hope was resettlement to a third country. In light of the massive global needs for resettlement, the chances of that happening in the regular UNHCR fashion are, however, extremely low, as there is no right in principle to resettlement. But with the help of the author and many other volunteers, particularly many former Vietnamese boat people who are now part of the global Vietnamese diaspora, Mrs. Loan's family found a way to embark on privately sponsored resettlement. Only a few countries in the Global North, such as Australia and Canada, began offering this alternative pathway a few years ago, yet massive funds are required to sponsor a whole family. Given that sponsoring refugees to go to Australia is much more expensive, the Mrs. Loan's family opted to try their luck with the Canadian immigration authorities.

Resettlement processes are never fast, even in the best of cases, but for Mrs. Loan's family the waiting took even longer due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which delayed processing and departure. More than six years after their initial attempt to flee from Vietnam and the many hold-ups and setbacks in Indonesia, the family finally set off for a new chapter in their lives in Canada in mid-2022. Considering the enormous dedication of Shira Sebban and many others to this family, the author's summary remark in the postscript of the book to read hardly comes as a surprise: "it may take a village to raise a child, but in our experience, it takes a global network to assist a refugee" (p. 157).

Vietnam's Modern Day Boat People is not a typical academic account of refugees that seeks to interpret people's trajectories through theoretical lenses,

but is rather a neat and well-researched case study of Mrs. Loan's escape from Vietnam and the many consequences this had for her family and extended social networks back in Vietnam. In an extraordinarily fashion, Sebban manages to draw the reader into the family's story, using numerous first-hand sources, such as family portraits, translated official court documents and long quotes from the protagonists interviewed. For those who want to learn more, the author has also compiled a helpful reading list, which makes the book a very useful resource for students and activists alike.

Antje Missbach

DANIEL FUCHS / SASCHA KLOTZBÜCHER / ANDREA RIEMENSCHNITTER / LENA SPRINGER / FELIX WEMHEUER (eds), *Die Zukunft mit China denken*. Vienna / Berlin: Mandelbaum-Verlag, 2023. 384 pages, €28.00. ISBN 9-783-9913-6026-1

Few academics have been honoured with a commemorative volume like the one presented here. It originated from a conference in Vienna in 2020 celebrating the emeritus status of Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, professor of Sinology and current programme director for China at the Vienna think tank "Center for Strategic Analysis". As Daniel Fuchs and Felix Wemheuer, two of the editors, state in their introduction, this volume is indeed not a *Kessel Bunter* ("Colourful Pot", p. 15) of contributions, but rather resembles a thematic issue, where former students and colleagues, along with the honoree herself, ponder a topic that has hitherto scarcely been in the focus of China research: the future.

With the title *Die Zukunft mit China denken* (*Thinking the Future with China*), the editors indirectly reference the core thesis of Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's recently published book *China und die Neuordnung der Welt* (*China and the Reordering of the World*, Vienna: Brandstätter, 2023), in which she calls for recognising China as a world power and systematically incorporating the country into the multipolar world. The anthology achieves more than its title promises: it not only shows how to think about the future with China, but also aims to outline different Chinese visions of the future from history and the present.

In the introduction, Fuchs and Wemheuer reflect on the transformation of Western perceptions of China and address the increasingly authoritarian development of China since Xi Jinping's assumption of office. The increasing confrontation between China and the "West" is a consequence both of Western perceptions of threat and the Chinese self-perception of exceptionalism (p. 14).