

Restaurants and Resettlement:
Cambodian Refugees Finding Success in the
American Food Industry

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Abstract

Current resettlement policies within the global migration regime largely disregard the capabilities and strengths that refugees possess in serving as active contributors to receiving societies. Paternalism and the victimization of the refugee population are prominent issues that continue to hinder the efficacy of state practices, and in response, this essay highlights the importance of self-reliance and autonomy in resettlement through an examination of Cambodian refugees' exemplary prosperity in the Californian donut industry. Arguing that their restaurateurship was the most critical factor in their successful resettlement, this paper considers how Cambodian refugees were able to overcome many socioeconomic challenges of integration through the financial stability, close co-ethnic ties, and social mobility that these refugee-owned donut shops facilitated. The case study justifies the importance of supporting refugee entrepreneurship, and serves to encourage states to create more opportunities for refugees to exercise greater autonomy and agency in resettlement.

Introduction

The American culinary landscape holds a vast repertoire of ethnic foods from all over the world, each embodying their own unique flavours and complex histories. Food possesses the remarkable ability to convey the stories of a group of people, as well as the larger social, economic, and political forces that underlie their experiences (Perales, 2016). Within these comestible expressions of culture, a compelling relationship exists between human migration and food. While the former plays a critical role in the ways in which cuisines are crafted, adapted, and presented across various settings, food also has an equally important influence over how migrants form their identities, create space for themselves, and overcome adversity (Perales, 2016). The interconnection between these two subjects is equally dynamic and enlightening, and is undoubtedly present in one of America's most renowned food industries: Californian donut

shops. Since the emergence of this culinary empire in the 1980s, this sector has been spearheaded by Cambodian refugee-led businesses, and they have redefined the circumstances under which forced migrants are able to successfully resettle in the United States. This case study provides a fascinating example of the powerful impacts that the food industry can have on refugees' lives, and vice versa.

Following the ratification of the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, the succeeding decade saw the resettlement of more than 800,000 Southeast Asian refugees in the United States, with a significant portion originating from Cambodia (Gordon, 1987). Drawn to the warmer climate of the Pacific coast and the support garnered from chain migration networks, many chose to permanently reside in California, which resulted in the formation of Long Beach's Cambodia Town (Mortland and Ledgerwood, 1987). This ethnic enclave is now home to the largest Cambodian diasporic community in the world, and its inhabitants have been commended as one of America's most well-integrated waves of migrants (Hwee-Hwa Chan, 2013; Mortland and Ledgerwood, 1987). With such resiliency and thriving entrepreneurship among the refugee population, this city in Southern California serves as the heart of the Cambodian-American donut industry, and is therefore the regional focus of this paper.

Although there is a wide extent of research that analyzes the experiences of Cambodian refugees, their contributions to the American food scene has received little attention in academic publications. Instead, much of the literature surrounding this demographic heavily focuses on their stories of survivorship and victimization, which has inadvertently contributed to the reinforcement of paternalism in the migration regime (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007). In response to these concerns, this paper rather highlights the success of Cambodian refugees' integration by examining the interplay between food and migration. By delving into the history

of this group and their journey as emerging restaurateurs, this essay argues that Cambodian refugees' active and autonomous participation in the food industry was the most critical factor in their successful resettlement. In becoming small business owners, Cambodian refugees were able to overcome many of the challenges of resettlement and achieve outstanding levels of prosperity after arriving in the United States, thus exemplifying the invaluable benefits of restaurateurship in navigating the arduous processes of societal integration.

Following a review of the conceptual framework that defines successful refugee integration and a brief historical contextualization of Cambodian donuts shops, this thesis will be explored through three sections, each examining a different facet of refugees' lives and how they improved as a result of their culinary entrepreneurship. The first section of this essay examines the economic prosperity of the restaurant industry and how it helped low-skilled individuals escape abject poverty. The subsequent section considers the social value attributed to these businesses and their ability to strengthen both domestic and transnational relationships among members of the refugee community. The third section then addresses acceptance within the receiving locality, analyzing how these delectable treats became a bridge between the foreign and native-born population and allowed refugees to enjoy upwards social mobility. The conclusion then summarizes the arguments of this essay, reiterates how the donut industry was essential to Cambodian refugees' successful integration, and provides suggestions into how these findings can be applied to resettlement approaches in the global migration regime for future amelioration.

Conceptualizing Successful Refugee Integration

Underpinning this thesis and the arguments of this essay is the conceptual framework proposed by Alastair Ager and Alison Strang (2008) that seeks to define the specificities of successful refugee integration. Similar to many other terms in the field of migration, there are

numerous interpretations of what successful integration exactly entails, with little consensus on which definition is the most accurate or effective. Despite being a key objective of resettlement, the lack of consolidation surrounding integration results in very disparate approaches among actors, allowing for hostile tactics like forced assimilation to go unchecked (Ager and Strang, 2008). These methods have proved to be immensely harmful to migrant populations, demonstrating a need for a comprehensive and unequivocal framework for analysis. This paper thus employs Ager and Strang's (2008) domains of integration as the most agreeable theory, which outlines various markers that can be used to assess refugees' integration into society.

Broadly sorted into four categories of employment, education, housing, and health, these measures provide a definitive set of conditions that must be met in order for refugees to be considered successfully integrated. Of this expansive list, the following indicators are most emphasized: financial security and economic independence, reliable emotional support networks, internalized feelings of belonging, mutual respect and positive interaction with locals, and an overall restoration of self-esteem (Ager and Strang, 2008). Cultural retention is also identified as an important factor as the authors stress that refugees must not feel compelled to assimilate into dominant society; ethnic pluralism and the preservation of one's identity is not only essential to their long-term happiness, but also contributes to the creation of a diverse liberal society (Ager and Strang, 2008). Although these measures are not completely indisputable and may not be applicable to all refugees' experiences, they do assist in determining foundational criteria for what constitutes successful integration and a decent quality of life after resettlement. As such, these indicators are the premise of this essay and are referred to throughout the paper to examine the experiences of Cambodian refugees in the United States.

Contextualizing the Cambodian Donut Shop

Prior to the 1970s, immigration from Cambodia to America was rare; only a few elites had come to the country for higher education, but the majority of the population simply did not have the means nor desire to leave their homeland (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007). This drastically changed after the onset of the Cambodian civil war in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge, formally referred to as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, belligerently took control of the state in an attempt to revert the country back to an agrarian socialist society (Ling and Austin, 2010). In four years, nearly 30% of the population perished due to starvation, disease, and overexhaustion, but the most harrowing cause of death was the systematic massacre of educated persons (Ling and Austin, 2010). The Cambodian genocide is a tragic fragment of the global conflict between communism and capitalism, and resulted in a massive displacement of the country's citizens, many of whom would arrive in America over the next few decades.

The United States, alongside many other states in the Global North, offered to resettle thousands of Cambodian refugees in the late 20th century (Ling and Austin, 2010). By 1985, approximately 130,000 Cambodians had arrived in the United States, but it was quickly realized that escaping persecution was only the first step in their journey to security (Gordon, 1987). The influx of foreigners sparked a contentious debate among stakeholders in the migration regime as politicians, citizens, and refugees alike questioned how they would fare in a new country and assimilate into America's 'melting pot'. The primary goal of resettlement has always been seamless integration into dominant society, but as severe trauma, low-education, and substantial cultural differences characterized this population, there was serious concern that success in this endeavour was largely unattainable (Ager and Strang, 2008).

Despite the difficulties of resettlement, the result by the turn of the century was an astoundingly unprecedented exercise of agency by the refugees themselves. Built on the efforts of Ted Ngoy, a Cambodian refugee nicknamed the ‘Donut King’ of California, the Cambodian ‘donut boom’ of the 1980s flourished as Ngoy established an expansive network of migrants and taught each of them the basic skills needed to operate a donut shop like himself (Mydans, 1995). An affluent empire of these independent restaurants rapidly emerged and by 1995, Cambodian refugees had come to own approximately 80% of the donut shops in California (Miller, 2002; Quintero, 2005). As the prosperity of the donut industry soared, Cambodian refugees increasingly began exemplifying indicators of successful integration as their financial security, communal relationships, and social mobility improved.

Achieving Financial Stability and Security

Delving into Ager and Strang’s (2008) first marker, stable employment and economic independence are considered to be essential for refugees’ successful integration. Without a reliable source of income, many migrants’ chronic stress persists due to the inaccessibility of safe housing, proper nutrition, and other basic necessities (Kibria, 1993; Ager and Strang, 2008). Falling into the poverty cycle adds another layer of hardship for forced migrants as this burdensome intersectionality amplifies their marginalization in dominant society (Miller, 2002). This seemingly never-ending struggle to become self-reliant endangers both their physical and mental wellbeing, and significantly obstructs refugees’ ability to successfully establish themselves in their place of resettlement. Although governments are tasked with mitigating these challenges with orientation, vocational training, and social welfare programs, most fail to adequately support refugees after their arrival, forcing them to create their own pathways to prosperity (Ager and Strang, 2008).

In the late 20th century, donut shops provided a reliable mechanism for Cambodian refugees to evade the perils of impoverishment. Upon resettlement, many encountered discrimination from xenophobic employers and with an apparent lack of professional skills required for the American workforce, self-employment became the most strategic and profitable means to earn a livelihood (Kibria, 1993). Prior to their unexpected displacement, those outside of Cambodia's elite circles had limited exposure to Western languages and were therefore unable to speak English when they came to the United States (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007). To overcome this barrier, opening these grab-and-go restaurants provided an opportunity to prosper without much language proficiency as the few words exchanged between clients and owners in donut shops revolved around their finite menu of pastries and beverages (Mydans, 1995). One refugee, Ly Yiv, even shares how the first English words he learned in America were the names of donut flavours, then followed by everyday phrases (Mydans, 1995). By entering an industry that could thrive with few professional skills, Cambodian refugees were able to achieve stable levels of prosperity as the income generated from their businesses not only prevented a decline into poverty, but also inadvertently helped in accelerating their successful integration in other areas as well. As time passed and refugees gained more experience as restaurateurs, their English gradually improved through regular interaction with their customers and they were also able to develop invaluable skills in business management (Ling and Austin, 2010), allowing them to further advance their linguistic and economic integration into the United States.

In addition to being a source of stable employment for low-skilled refugees, donut shops greatly exceeded expectations and emerged as a highly profitable business venture. On revenue alone, selling donuts was a significantly rewarding industry. Made with inexpensive ingredients but sold at a high markup price, the net profit margin of these restaurants was massive and what

initially started as a relatively small investment quickly expanded into a multimillion-dollar enterprise (Ling and Austin, 2010). Aside from being a reliable source of income, donut shops also helped relieve financial burdens in other aspects of refugees' lives as well. As a casual, self-owned workplace, refugee parents could bring their children with them to work and delegate tasks to members of the family, which had the dual advantage of reducing employee wages and saving on the costs of childcare during working hours (Kibria, 1993). By having access to an industrial kitchen, Cambodian refugees were guaranteed the space and means to feed their families as well. Even though the commodities of donut shops were not the healthiest dietary option, leftovers would be shared among themselves as a free, delightful indulgence (Kibria, 1993). This generally satisfied cravings for overpriced fast foods, contributing to the overall savings of Cambodian refugee families at the time.

Thus, it is evident that donut shops were the most economical industry for Cambodian refugees to enter upon resettling in the United States. The low skill requirements, high profitability, and advantageous opportunities to reduce other expenses were critical in their fulfillment of the financial dimension of successful refugee integration. The prosperity of these restaurants meant that they were no longer just hovering above the poverty line, but actively becoming members of a new income bracket as wealthy entrepreneurs. By expertly averting the detrimental cycle of poverty in a manner that ensured their long-term economic security, Cambodian refugees were able to successfully integrate in American society, all whilst enshrining themselves as valuable contributors to the Californian food industry.

Strengthening Refugee Relationships

Socially, resettlement can be a very isolating process for victims of persecution who have found themselves far away from their homeland. The emotional hardships of becoming a refugee

and seeking asylum leaves many with feelings of loss, separation, and helplessness, all of which heavily impede on their ability to form meaningful relationships later on (Mazumdar et al., 2000). Ager and Strang (2008) discuss how forming strong social bonds with co-ethnics is critical to integration as they allow migrants to connect with others who have undergone similar experiences. Refugees who are isolated from their community are four times more likely to suffer from depression, and as mental wellbeing and emotional support are key indicators of successful refugee integration, it is clear that these social networks are invaluable to the larger population (Ager and Strang, 2008). As diasporic spaces, ethnic enclaves are known to help tremendously in relieving the psychological burdens of displacement as they create a central location for these meaningful interactions (Mazumdar et al., 2000). Long Beach's Cambodia Town, which hosts the largest population of Cambodians outside of the country itself, is no exception to this trend and the city's donut shops have undoubtedly played a vital role in facilitating the development of these important relationships (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007).

By the late 20th century, the expansive donut empire that Ted Ngoy and his associates created had become as socially beneficial as it was economic. While the initial goal may have been survival and profit, these businesses brought members of the diaspora together as they worked in each others' shops, shared advice on entrepreneurial practices, and celebrated their achievements together as a tight-knit community (Mazumdar et al., 2000). Miller (2002) notes how the process of disseminating skills and information was an essential factor in the exponential growth of both the donut industry and Cambodian refugee community; one entrepreneur would first invest themselves both financially and emotionally in their apprentices, and the 'pay it forward' mentality would then spark a chain reaction of tutelage that ensured others achieved similar levels of success. By hiring other refugees, coworkers in donut shops

became a source of companionship throughout the workday that often evolved into close friendships (Kibria, 1993). These relationships were supportive emotional outlets that allowed Cambodian refugees to connect with others who intrinsically understood their experiences, effectively reducing the loneliness and grief that characteristically darkens the early stages of resettlement (Mazumdar et al., 2000). Integration is less difficult for refugees when they have others to lean on for support (Ager and Strang, 2008), and without the donut industry facilitating these relationships, Cambodians would not have been able to navigate the challenges of resettlement as well as they did.

A secondary benefit of these close community ties was strong cultural retention. By actively surrounding themselves with other Cambodians, members of the diaspora were able to transmit Cambodian culture to the United States without fear of being ostracized as a threatening foreign minority (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007). Residents of the Cambodia Town enclave, who were primarily donut shop owners, primarily spoke Khmer amongst themselves, shared traditional recipes, built a Buddhist temple, and even celebrated national holidays together (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007). As many refugees accepted that it was unlikely they would return often to Cambodia, recreating pieces of their homeland in America helped lessen their heartache and allowed them to enjoy pieces of home from thousands of miles away (Mazumdar et al., 2000). These cultural expressions and practices, which would have otherwise been lost to American assimilation, became deeply entrenched in the enclave's traditions and as a result, Southern California is now revered as one of the most lively spaces for Cambodian cultural activities. This preservation of culture is one of the key indicators of Ager and Strang's (2008) domains of successful integration and demonstrates the immensely positive impacts that the donut industry had on the sociocultural identities of Cambodian refugees.

While some actors fear that intra-ethnic social networks segregate migrants from dominant society and hinder their integration, Cambodian refugees prove how in reality, this is quite the opposite (Hwee-Hwa Chan, 2013). By forming a diasporic community that collectively acknowledged their origins and cared deeply for each other, the burdens of resettlement were lessened tremendously and Cambodians were able to enhance their social and emotional wellbeing. Donut shops were fundamental in strengthening the bonds between members of the Cambodian diaspora, and their ability to facilitate both emotional support and cultural retention was pivotal in the demographic's successful integration.

Earning Acceptance in America

The final measure of successful integration uniquely looks outside of the refugee population to the attitudes of the receiving society. Ager and Strang (2008) discuss how indicators must also assess the perspectives of the wider host community in order to grasp the absence of conflict and mutuality of belonging between the foreign and native-born population. As populism and xenophobia become increasingly prevalent in migrant-receiving states, tension and resentment heavily impede on refugees' ability to integrate (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007). Regardless of how much an individual may feel that they belong in their country of resettlement, rejection from dominant society still poses a substantial barrier to de facto citizenship (Ager and Strang, 2008). Refugees who fail to establish these 'social bridges' more frequently encounter discrimination, harassment, and become victims of hate crimes, all of which are detrimental to their wellbeing (Ager and Strang, 2008). Earning acceptance and respect is no simple feat, but for Cambodian refugees, donut shops provided the perfect conduit for transforming their image from humanitarian burdens to valuable citizens of the United States.

The decision to enter a well-established industry that was already extremely popular among American consumers was a strategic choice that greatly benefitted Cambodian refugees both economically and socially. In the second half of the 20th century, donuts were a staple in California's food culture as they presented a cheap and convenient treat for middle class families (Penfold, 2015). If these restaurateurs had instead opted to sell traditional dishes that were unfamiliar to American palates, the outcome would have likely been very different as the introduction of foreign cuisine tends to initially garner criticism from the native population (Prajapati, 2016). By catering to these preexisting preferences and becoming experts in a local trade, people quickly began to see Cambodian refugees less as foreign victims of a backwards society and more as friendly neighbourhood donut shop owners. Concern surrounding their potential for assimilation dissipated with this new status, and a drastic shift occurred in which American citizens, particularly those in California, responded positively to the arrival of refugees and supported their businesses (Prajapati, 2016; Needham and Quintiliani, 2007).

As the success of the refugee-owned donut industry soared, public narratives began to reflect Cambodians' upwards social mobility. Throughout the 1990s, countless reputable media outlets outwardly praised Cambodian refugees' contributions to American society, claiming how "Asian immigrants do far more good than harm to the nation's economy" (Goldberg, 1996, p.32). Their achievements were celebrated by the nation for their embodiment of the American Dream; the 'rags to riches' storyline of a once destitute refugee finding their place in the United States through hard work and resilience greatly appealed to the wider population, encouraging many to empathize with a group that they had previously ostracized (Mydans, 1995). The propagation of this uplifting universal trope helped earn the respect of Americans and therefore created the reciprocal admiration and amicable rapport required for successful integration (Ager and Strang,

2008). Although Cambodian refugees were in no way entirely free from discrimination, becoming donut shop owners undeniably reduced the hostility that they encountered in their daily lives and allowed them to evade some of the most troubling challenges of resettlement.

Food has continuously proven to be a powerful mechanism for bringing people together, and the relationship between American citizens and Cambodian refugees proved to be a prime example of this social phenomenon. Donuts served as the invaluable ‘social bridge’ that encouraged the native-born population to welcome a new demographic to their country and value their contributions to the state’s prosperity. This transformation of social perception was critical in ensuring refugees had positive interactions with locals and truly felt a sense of belonging in the United States, both of which are key indicators of successful integration. The history of Cambodian donut shops is still revered as one of the greatest realizations of the American Dream to occur in the 20th century, thus exemplifying how the food industry significantly contributes to refugees’ success after resettlement.

Conclusion

In summary, it is evident that donut shops have had an extraordinarily positive impact on refugees’ ability to integrate into American society. Their prosperity in this thriving sector of the food industry has resulted in a plethora of economic and social advantages, and Cambodian refugees have deservedly enjoyed substantial improvements in their quality of life after resettling in the United States. However, these accomplishments are often overshadowed by the paternalistic victimization that characterizes much of the discourse on refugees, consequently resulting in a widespread failure to recognize this population’s capacity for self-determination. This oversight has reinforced many of the structural injustices within the global migration

regime, and demands an inquiry into how stakeholders can create more opportunities for forced migrants to exercise agency within their own integration process.

In efforts to look beyond their struggles and highlight forced migrants' triumphs, this essay examined the relationship between Cambodian refugees and their experiences as restaurateurs. Arguing that their successful integration was a result of their active participation in the food industry, this thesis was applied to three facets of Cambodian refugees' lives: financial security, intra-ethnic relations, and social mobility in American society. Assessments were supported by Ager and Strang's (2008) domains of integration, which presented a set of specific indicators that define successful integration and what this term constitutes in practice.

The first section demonstrated how donut shops were an effective solution to Cambodians' struggles to achieve economic independence. These highly profitable businesses not only helped Cambodian refugees evade the perils of the poverty cycle, but also allowed them to develop valuable professional skills, reduce expenses in other aspects of their lives, and become wealthy contributors to the Californian food scene. Each of these beneficial outcomes contributed to their financial security, thus fulfilling the economic dimension of successful integration. This was followed by a discussion of how donut shops helped strengthen the relationships within the Cambodian refugee community. As interactions within the workplace evolved into close friendships, members of the diaspora were able to connect with others who empathized with their hardships, allowing them to relieve themselves of their psychological burdens. These connections also facilitated the transmission of Cambodian culture to the United States, a practice that lessened the heartache of displacement. Reliable emotional support networks and cultural retention are both strong indicators of successful integration, and without the donut industry, the realization of these conditions would not have been possible. The last

section examined Cambodian refugees' social mobility, analyzing how donuts served as the essential 'social bridge' between this newly-resettled population and their native-born counterparts. Through their success as donut shop owners, Cambodian refugees were praised for embodying the American Dream and the public's fears surrounding their inability to assimilate faltered. This transformation of social status encouraged Americans to embrace these naturalized citizens, which in turn allowed refugees to genuinely feel a sense of belonging in the United States and successfully integrate.

From a global perspective, it is imperative that readers recognize that the importance of this research does not lie in the donut industry itself, but in refugees' ability to exercise agency throughout their resettlement journey. As Venema (2020) states, "this story sheds light on refugees in a positive way, about what happens when they're given an opportunity". Rather than continuously patronizing forced migrants, stakeholders must create an environment that invites and empowers refugees to become active participants in their own integration process. The case of Cambodian refugees and the donut industry is just one example of how successful integration is possible when this approach is taken, and it is more than likely that this market niche has helped other migrants as well. Future research could examine whether similar trends are reflected in different ethnic groups and various other cuisines, which could then be applied to countering the paternalistic practices of the current migration regime and abolishing these ineffectual practices. Turkish migrants selling döner kebabs in Germany, Vietnamese refugees opening *pho* restaurants in Canada, or the mass popularization of Mexican cuisine in America are just a few potential pathways for further inquiry.

Successful integration is undoubtedly an achievable goal, but this relies heavily on actors' commitment to ensuring that refugees are able to exercise self-determination. The

resilience, capability, and drive that this demographic possesses are invaluable assets, and they deserve to be recognized as meaningful contributors to not just the food industry, but to states as a whole. The sooner that this truth is recognized, the sooner refugees will be able to find prosperity and peace in resettlement, and finally, the world will strive towards a more equitable and empowering society for all.

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