

Boat People

A FILM BY KJELL BOERSMA AND THAO LAM



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE





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Film Summary



As a child in Vietnam, Thao's mother often rescued ants from bowls of sugar water. Years later they would return the favor. Using a striking metaphor, *Boat People* traces one family's flight across the turbulent waters of history.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Boat People* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, [visit https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/](https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/).

THE FILM

Key Participants

- Thao Lam - narrator, filmmaker, daughter
- Thao's mother
- Thao's father
- Thao's grandmother

Key Issues

Boat People is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Vietnamese "Boat People"
- the post-war Vietnamese refugee crisis
- family separations, chain migrations, and assimilation
- intergenerational trauma
- PTSD, depression, and survivor's guilt
- collective trauma, resilience, and survival
- global citizenship

Background Information

Vietnam's "Boat People"

As the Vietnam War came to an end in 1975, millions of Vietnamese citizens were forced to flee the country to avoid death, imprisonment, and other violent forms of revenge, repression, and "re-education" by the oppressive Communist regime. From 1975 to 1992, an estimated two million Vietnamese people abandoned their homes and possessions to risk their lives and embark on illegal boat trips across the South China Sea in desperate hopes of reaching refuge on far-flung coasts. The frightening journeys into a violent unknown at sea were marred by traumatic tales of family separations, pirate attacks, drownings, starvation, and, in total, hundreds of thousands of fatalities. This mass exodus of wartime refugees, known as "Vietnam's boat people" remains one of the largest humanitarian crises of its kind in modern history, and the implications and experiences of the survivors still reverberate around the world today. Of the more than 500,000 Vietnamese who tried to leave their country, scholars estimate anywhere between 10-50% did not survive.

The trauma of fleeing persecution in Vietnam was compounded by the perilous journey at sea, including threats posed by piracy that called for a UN anti-piracy effort. In 1981 alone, out of the 452 boats that arrived in Thailand carrying 15,479 refugees: 349 boats had been attacked an average of three times each; 578 women had been raped; 228 women had been abducted; and 881 people were dead or missing.

Family Ties

The Boat Peoples' forced migrations disrupted the fundamental bedrock of Vietnamese culture – family. Generations of deeply tight-knit family units were ripped apart in an instant: some were killed, some were left behind, and some had to wait years for their own chance to safely immigrate and reunite with their loved ones, leaving millions of Vietnamese refugees adrift in disconnected diasporas around the world.

Many Vietnamese refugees spent years in refugee camps in Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However many countries were wary of accepting refugees, fearing that a large refugee population would pose challenges to the existing education and healthcare systems. The UN intervened in 1979 and soon after, the U.S passed the Refugee Act of 1980 which allowed Vietnamese refugees who have family in the U.S to enter directly. By 2000, more than a million people with Vietnamese family ties lived in the U.S.

The enormity of leaving their families behind, arriving in a foreign land to face xenophobia and racism, all while reeling with grief and survivor's guilt, culminated in an intense form of PTSD for many post-war survivors who made it out of Vietnam. Despite their traumatic hardships, Vietnamese refugees proved to be an extremely successful and highly resilient minority group once settled in their adopted homelands.

Survival is Instinctive

In *Boat People*, audiences are invited to recognize direct connections between the collective power of ant communities and Vietnamese survivors as they use their collective intelligence and rely on collaborative community efforts to find power. Namely, through the lens of focusing on an otherwise “powerless” creature - an individual ant - this film exposes how when confronted with perilous realities the collective power of many is a tool for survival.

Every miraculous feat of strength is an evolutionary instinct that is deeply rooted in protecting the needs of the whole. Much like the ant communities, with human communities and relations, the power of many is a crucial component when faced with a dominant power that seeks to harm or eradicate existence. In 2024, the UN Refugee Agency estimated that a staggering 120 million refugees were forcibly displaced around the world. The fate of the world’s most vulnerable populations remains an ongoing humanitarian crisis - and the importance of a compassionate understanding of the refugee experience, global citizenship education, and humane immigration policies are more essential today than ever.

Sources:

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Nguyen, Katrina. "Vietnamese Boat People: Stereotypes and PTSD." Cold Tea Collective, 23 Oct. 2017. <https://coldteacollective.com/vietnamese-boat-people-stereotypes-and-ptsd/>

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DISCUSSION PROMPTS

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- Were you left with any overwhelming emotions or questions immediately after watching the film?
- What was the most impactful scene in the film for you?

SURVIVAL INSTINCTS - *Boat People* showcased the survival instincts of ant colonies as an allegory for how millions of Vietnamese families protected each other in the face of death, danger, and the unknown as they fled their homeland in fear. “The root of every impulse is to protect their family,” Thao Lam explains about the astounding feats that ant colonies are capable of in the face of danger, with the main cornerstone of their survival being unity: “No individual ant can survive on its own.”

- Can you think of a time when you were completely “on your own”?
- What are some of the ways you directly or indirectly seek out or receive safety from others?

- What are some of the ways in which you specifically rely on your family? Where do you think you would be without them?

RESILIENCY – Thao Lam describes how ants are one of the most successful species on the planet, with evolutionary instincts that have been deeply ingrained in their cellular structure for millions of years. Their successful longevity results from “roles that are constantly shifting and adjusting to the conditions they encounter and the needs of the colony.”

- Thao Lam describes some of the ants’ miraculous survival mechanisms (colonies floating on water for weeks or even surviving underwater in a comatose state) in times of extreme peril. Can you identify some of the instinctive mechanisms that Thao Lam’s family used to cope with their own life and death struggles?
- Ant colonies can be described as a “superorganism” when they unite together to perform extraordinary feats of strength or survival. Can you draw a few parallels to that same “superorganism” mentality demonstrated by the Vietnamese refugees in the film?
- What lessons do you think global refugees can teach the rest of humanity? Resilience? Non-judgmental acceptance?

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA - Ant colonies work together in astoundingly complex ways to survive, but Thao Lam underscores that “unlike humans, ants are not weighed down by loss.” They don’t carry the deep emotional weight that humans do after experiencing traumatic experiences. Vietnam’s Boat People endured a collective trauma after the war - but the resulting aftermath was intensely personal for each individual as they adapted to the unique demands of their new lives in a foreign land, separated from their homes and the close-knit communities and family systems that typify Vietnamese culture.

- Can you describe a few ways that each character in *Boat People* dealt with trauma and PTSD as the years went by?
- Each member of Thao’s family experienced their own version of trauma after leaving Vietnam. Can you imagine the complexity and wide-ranging emotions of each refugee’s personal experiences based on the different emotions exhibited by Thao Lam’s family in the film?
- Intergenerational trauma is passed on in cases of collective humanitarian crises like Vietnam’s Boat People, with many important stories of loss, sacrifice, and resilience being lost before they can be recorded for future generations. Can you see the importance of preserving the history and voices of refugees despite the traumatic subject matter that might be difficult to discuss?

CLOSING QUESTION/ ACTIVITY

OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions.

- What emotions are you experiencing after watching and discussing the film?
- Did you have any preconceived notions or misconceptions about refugees that were challenged by the film?
- What did you learn from the film? Were you left with any questions about the refugee experience?

TAKING ACTION

- Share factual resources about refugees and challenge misinformation and harmful misconceptions and to help others understand the accurate, real-world experiences of fellow human beings in crisis.
- Research local humanitarian groups in your area that support refugees or asylum seekers and inquire about volunteer or service opportunities.
- Contact your political representatives and advocate for their support in passing compassionate and humane immigration policies.

"No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" - Warsan Shire

Resources

Boat People - Thao Lam's full documentary streaming on PBS.

Global Citizenship Education - UNESCO promotes global citizenship education to help learners understand the world around them and work together to fix the big problems that affect everyone, no matter where they're from.

Refugees International - Refugees International was started in 1979 as a citizens' movement to defend the rights of people fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Since then, [they] have expanded to become a globally focused organization, advocating wherever rights and refuge are at risk.

The Paper Boat - A Refugee Story - Thao Lam's refugee story in the form of an illustrated children's book

UN Refugee Agency - Established after WWII, this international agency has been protecting people forced to flee conflict and persecution for over 70 years.

Vietnamese Boat People - Vietnamese Boat People (VBP) is a podcast and non-profit with the mission to preserve and carry forward the stories of the Vietnamese diaspora. [They] aim to educate and inspire listeners on the diaspora history of the Vietnamese community and connect people through stories of the human spirit.

Credits & Acknowledgments

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