



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXVI / 2025

**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ISBN 979-12-5701-257-1 (Paper) 979-12-5701-258-8 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXVI, 2025

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei "Cesare Bonacossa", University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it www.viella.it			

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REFRAMING DISPLACEMENT IN COLD WAR ASIA

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Yumi Moon (ed.) *Cold War Refugees: Connected Histories of Displacement and Migration across Postcolonial Asia*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, xi+252 pp. (ISBN 9781503643130)

Over the past decades, scholars have repeatedly underlined the risks of treating the «refugee» as a universal humanitarian figure, and many have instead invited academic effort towards a reconceptualization tied to a more heterogeneous landscape of historical and geographical conditions that produce displacement [Gatrell 2013]. Such warnings are particularly critical in fields such as migration studies, the more circumscribed refugee studies, and Cold War studies that, by privileging state actors, diplomatic archives, and super-power rivalry as their primary empirical and analytical lenses, lure researchers into a Western-centric and ‘high politics’ epistemological trap.

In such a framework, *Cold War Refugees: Connected Histories of Displacement and Migration across Postcolonial Asia*, edited by Yumi Moon, proposes a significant reorientation of perspective, challenging the reproduction of the refugee as a placeless and timeless figure. As the title appropriately anticipates, this collection of contributions introduces and guides the reader through experiences of population displacement caused by Cold War conflicts in Asia – thus seeking to fill the void in the literature focusing on non-Western regions of the globe.

The collection advances a transnational and transimperial framework that embeds refugee movements within broader processes of partition, sovereignty formation, and geopolitical restructuring. At the conceptual level, the volume navigates the currents of two closely intertwined debates: the definition of the refugee as a legal and political category, and the historiography of the Cold War itself. In her introduction, Yumi Moon contends that the historiography of the Cold War has been overwhelmingly shaped by the decisions and strategies of «great powers» and political elites, a perspective that has relegated refugee experiences to the shadow of national and supra-national events. Against this backdrop, the book proposes a shift in scale and focus. Refugee displacements, it argues, were neither isolated nor purely national phenomena; rather, they unfolded within a web of trans-Asian connections that linked crises across the continent both synchronically and diachronically. The United States’ experience with Korean

refugees, for instance, informed its position at the 1954 Geneva Conference when addressing the movement of Vietnamese civilians, illustrating how refugee governance circulated across contexts. The resulting partitions, in turn, played their role in determining and shaping such forced mobilities. Borders drawn in Korea, India and Pakistan, or Vietnam were not merely diplomatic settlements but historical forces in their own right – structures that reshaped societies, reconfigured political loyalties, and, in many cases, fuelled prolonged violence and civil conflict. However, despite embracing such a perspective, the volume then resists the portrayal of refugees as passive victims of geopolitical upheaval. Through what might be described as a form of «refugeetude», it explores how displaced populations internalised, reinterpreted, and, at times, strategically appropriated Cold War ideologies to navigate and reshape the political and cultural landscapes of their new environments.

With regard to the structure of the monograph, the introduction lays the theoretical framework by positioning refugees as historically marginalised subjects within state-centred Cold War narratives and by proposing a transnational analytical lens attentive to the interconnectedness of Asian displacement crises. It identifies three guiding threads, namely interconnected refugee trajectories, partition as a geopolitical instrument, and the political agency of displaced populations, which build the foundations for the subsequent chapters. The body of the volume then turns to five distinct, though analytically resonant, geographical contexts: Vietnam; the Dachen Islands and Taiwan; the Korean peninsula; Pakistan, through the spatial politics of Karachi; and Afghanistan. The epilogue departs from strictly historical analysis and offers a more philosophical meditation on statelessness, violence, and the ethical limits of Cold War humanism. Here, the refugee emerges as a figure that unsettles the presumed stability of sovereign borders and exposes the moral fragility underpinning modern political orders.

It is particularly in this concluding chapter that the author, Aishwary Kumar, broadens the volume's scope by moving from historical reconstruction to philosophical reflection. He challenges the familiar narrative that portrays the Cold War as a stabilising force that prevented a third world war in Europe, suggesting instead that such a view obscures what he describes as an ongoing «civil war of colonial origins» (p. 168) that unfolded across Asia and Africa and whose effects have not fully receded. Here, the apparent geopolitical equilibrium of the postwar era coexisted with - and in many ways depended upon - forms of protracted violence in the decolonising world. Kumar also offers a pointed critique of what he terms Cold War humanism. The humanitarian framing of refugees, he argues, often abstracts displaced populations from their political histories, recasting them as universal and ahistorical figures of suffering. In doing so, it risks erasing the very conflicts, borders, and power relations that produced their displacement. The epilogue concludes on a stark note: we now inhabit what

Kumar calls a «planet of refugees» (p. 193), a world in which vulnerability to displacement, disposability, and even extinction has become a shared - if profoundly unequal - condition.

Considered collectively, the case studies illuminate both the structural convergences and the contextual divergences that characterised refugee politics across postcolonial Asia. Nguyen's analysis of Vietnam's partition situates population transfer within a broader genealogy of imperial boundary-making, illustrating how civilian mobility was transformed into a diplomatic instrument. Yang's examination of the Dachen evacuation demonstrates how displacement was folded into anti-communist state-building in Taiwan, even as refugees confronted precarious conditions of resettlement. Moon's study of northern refugees in South Korea shifts the focus to the domestic political consequences of cross-border migration, revealing how refugee activism contributed to the consolidation of militant Cold War nationalism. In a different register, Muzaffar's chapter on Karachi foregrounds spatial governance, arguing that urban planning and refugee resettlement operated as mechanisms for managing instability within a Cold War framework of territorial control. Finally, Nasser and Crews complicate depoliticised humanitarian narratives in the Afghan case, showing how displaced populations were simultaneously framed as passive recipients of aid and acted as consequential political agents.

The principal strength of the volume lies in its capacity to provincialise state-centric Cold War historiography without collapsing into a celebratory account of refugee agency. By proposing the realm of displacement as a structural dimension of postcolonial order-making, the collection bridges diplomatic history and critical refugee scholarship. Its multi-archival foundation and broad geographic scope provide a significant degree of empirical soundness, while the emphasis on partition as a recurring geopolitical tool offers a compelling lens for reassessing mid-twentieth-century Asian transformations. At the same time, the volume's comparative ambition might be seen as raising questions about the degree of integration across the individual contributions. While the introduction compellingly frames refugee movements as interconnected across the region, the chapters tend to engage these connections implicitly rather than through sustained cross-referential dialogue. However, this is not easily achieved in edited collections, and this does not weaken the coherence of the collection, as it rather reflects the diversity of methodological and regional approaches assembled within it. Similarly, the broad conceptualisation of the «refugee», which proves analytically generative throughout the volume, also invites further reflection on definitional boundaries: as displacement emerges as a pervasive feature of postcolonial politics, the relationship between legal refugee status and broader forms of forcible mobility could perhaps be elaborated more explicitly. Finally, although the collection acknowledges the limited attention devoted to movements toward socialist states, this asymmetry points less to an

omission than to the enduring archival and historiographical unevenness that continues to shape the field. These considerations, far from detracting from the book's contribution, instead highlight its capacity to stimulate further comparative and theoretically nuanced scholarship on displacement in the Global Cold War.

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