

The Sociological Journey of the Vietnamese Diaspora in American Mainland

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Abstract

This article explores the sociological dimensions shaping the successful journey of the resilient Vietnamese diaspora in America, tracing their origin from pivotal evacuation events to notable achievements in sociocultural contexts. Indeed, the American involvement in Vietnam catalyzed the formation of Vietnamese enclaves on the American mainland. Adopting a descriptive approach, the article provides a comprehensive and nuanced account of the historical evolution of the Vietnamese diaspora, shedding light on the multifaceted factors that contributed to the establishment of their societal foundations in America.

Key words: Vietnam, United States, Refugees, Society.

Introduction

Inductive American conjectures of an Asian communist dystopia, based on the Domino theory, shall remain controversially disputed owing to the human cost, the collateral damage, and the undermined American international prestige. In an attempt to redeem such ravages, the United States administration, embarked on one of the most internationally significant asylum programs that would eventually lead to the birth of a Vietnamese society on American mainland.

American crusades on the Indochinese landscape kindled social, cultural, and political fissures, which continued to reverberate not only in Vietnam but also on the American mainland. In Vietnam, the newly formed communist government made concerted efforts to integrate the country's separated entities and to eradicate the colonial vestiges, disruption, shortages, and hardship through a communist approach, sparking a refugee crisis towards the United States. On the American mainland, however, American nationalists anxiously attempted to conceal the shame of defeat and redeem the effects of war. Accordingly, ever since the end of the American-Vietnamese conflict, there has been a continuing public and state awareness among political asylum seekers.

From the initial public appeal to subsequent posthumous assessments, this article endeavors to examine the evolution of American impulses towards the Vietnamese refugee cause. The focus extends towards assessing the resilience demonstrated by the Vietnamese community as it established a societal presence, actively participated in economic endeavors, and contributed to the political landscape. Similarly, our exploration seeks to evaluate the extent to which the Vietnamese, within their ethnic enclaves, not only navigated the challenges posed by a refugee crisis but also played a crucial role in shaping both their own communities and the broader fabric of American society. This analysis aims to provide insight into the multifaceted impact and transformative journey of the Vietnamese diaspora within the United States.

1. Becoming an American Refugee

"History repeats itself first as tragedy second as farce" declared Karl Marx. If we want to Comprehend the tumultuous and degrading circumstances of the Vietnamese evacuation, we may draw an analogy between the recent takeover of Kabul by Taliban in August 2021 and the fall of Saigon in 1975. Referring to Hubert van Es's iconic photo which vividly captured people scrambling into a helicopter on a rooftop in Saigon, Joe Biden declared, "There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan.". (BBC News, 2021)

John Warren, Director of News & Information at the university of California, Riverside, commented, "For students of history and those old enough to remember, the rapidity with which the Taliban captured the Afghan capital of Kabul evoked memories of the April 1975 fall of Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital." Describing the hasty process, he added that the 20-year American presence in Afghanistan came to an end with the mass evacuation of 120,000 Americans and Afghan citizens in only 17 days. Afghanistan was thereby Joe

Bidens's Saigon and if we go into the greatest details about the military evacuation in Afghanistan, only then we may grasp the chaotic and humiliating conditions on the eve of Saigon fall.

The Vietnamese diaspora in American mainland had its genesis in President Richard Nixon's speech from the white house in 7 April 1971. The latter declared,

"I understand the deep concerns which have been raised in this country, fanned by reports of brutalities in Vietnam.... tens of thousands of individual American soldiers — I have seen them there — building schools, roads, hospitals, clinics, who, through countless acts of generosity and kindness, have tried to help the people of South Vietnam. We can and we should be very proud of these men. They deserve not our scorn, but they deserve our admiration and our deepest appreciation" (Hunt, 2010, p. 214)

Given these concealed concerns and defences for the American quagmire, the American Vietnamese conflict clearly augured unfavourably for the U.S. administration. Evidently, the post war turmoil engulfed the American administration initially with hastily operations to rescue political asylum seekers and eventually with reconciliation programs for the "boat people". The Vietnamese conflict was henceforth in the American mainland.

1.1 The Land People

The Vietnamese tragedy of April 1975 began when President Ford refused further military operations to curb Viet Cong propagation in the south. However, he declared that orphans are to be evacuated on flights from Saigon to the United States carrying military cargo. The operation was called BABYLIFT and culminated in an airplane crash and more than one hundred dead. Despite the tragic crash, other airplanes under contract managed to eventually evacuate more than 2,600 Vietnamese orphans to Hawaii and on to the continental United States. (L.Haulman, 2012)

Notwithstanding the VIET Cong incessant incursions towards the south, the BABYLIFT was followed by hastily operations with airplanes, helicopters, and ships. The exact number of the refugees to be evacuated from South Vietnam was undetermined until the very last moment. At the throes of the Saigon administration, one hundred and thirty thousand evacuees were randomly selected, with one hundred and twenty-five thousand spots reserved for Vietnamese and 5,000 for Cambodians. The American ambassador in South Vietnam, Graham Martin, deliberately concealed the evacuation preparations in

an attempt to evade public panic which may accelerate the fall of the Thieu regime. (Chan, 2006, pp. 62-63)

According to the migration department in USA, more than 125,000 Vietnamese refugees were deported in April 1975 (Batalova, 2023). The United States systemically approached the complex issue. Accordingly, there were four reception facilities -camps-. The first reception center opened at Camp Pendleton in California on April 29, followed by Fort Chaffee in Arkansas on May 2, and Eglin Air Base in Florida on May 4. In an effort to relieve the congestion at the other three military bases, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania was quickly established on May 28. (Chan, 2006, p. 64). Now, the issue was how to resettle the evacuees from tent cities to permanent shelters?

1.1.1 Towards Resettlement

In the same year, U.S. officials along with voluntary agencies including the UNHCR diligently sought sponsors for the refugee camps. The Interagency Task Force set October 31 as the deadline for moving the refugees. By the end of 1975, the task was completed as the process of resettling the first wave was successfully accomplished, reception centers were closed, and eventually The Interagency Task Force disbanded itself on December 3. (Chan, 2006, p. 64)

The UNHCR played a decisive role both inside Vietnamese territories and in U.S. mainland. Following The Paris Peace Agreement of 27 January 1973; which temporarily ended the Vietnamese conflict; doors were open for UNHCR voluntary arrangement in both North and South Vietnam including reconstruction projects, health aids, and food and other relief supplies. However, After the evacuation crisis, UNHCR interest shifted towards the refugees' camps. (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2000, p. 81)

1.2 The Boat People

“BOAT PEOPLE”, as defined by William J. and Bruce M., are “refugees who fled from Vietnam by sea after the end of the Vietnam War. The exodus began in the late spring and summer of 1978 under the impact of a government decree nationalizing industry and commerce and other official measures allegedly discriminating against the overseas Chinese population residing in Vietnam.”

The aforementioned definition highlights key elements which we shall explore in this section. After considering major facts and statistics related to the “boat people” crisis, we will examine the following queries: why did the “boat people” crisis begin three years after the first wave’s resettlement? How did the economic and political measures taken by the recently formed government -the

socialist republic of Vietnam- contribute to the second wave crisis? And the most important query which pertains to our study is how did the crisis affect the U.S. society?

Early batches of the “boat people” were unpopular and relatively small compared to the first wave of the “land people”. Hence, Media initially paid little attention. However, Government officials of asylum where they landed deliberately subdued in order to prevent further escalation (Chan, 2006, p. 65). However, by the end of 1978, nearly 62,000 Vietnamese "boat people" anchored in different camps throughout Southeast Asia. 1979 witnessed a dramatic increase in Vietnamese boat arrivals; over more 54,000 arrived in June alone (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2000, pp. 82-83) In 1982, it was estimated that more than a million Vietnamese had fled to other Southeast Asian nations (William J. and Bruce M.). Evidently, the following figure demonstrates the time span between the first “land” wave and the second “boat” wave.

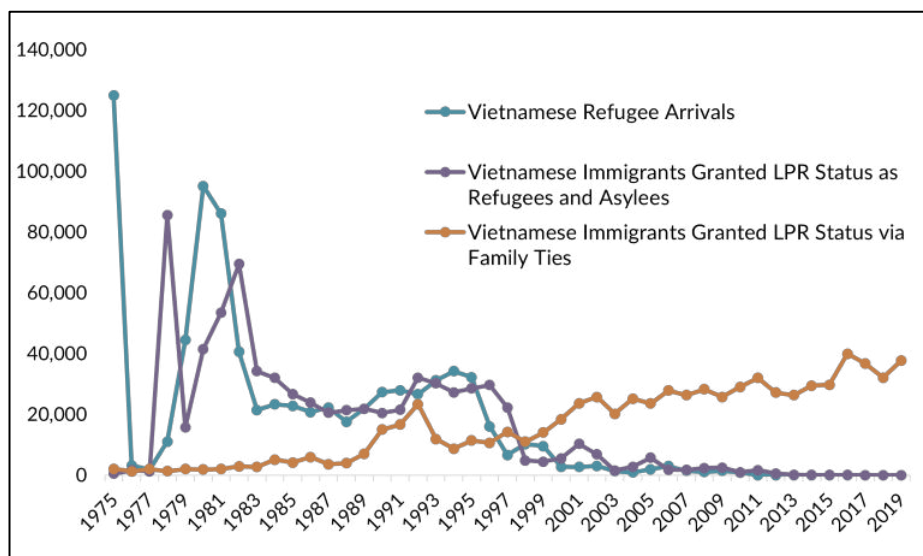


Figure 1 Vietnamese Refugee Arrivals to the United States and Select Immigration Pathways of Legal Permanent Residents, FY 1975-2019. (Batalova, 2023)

The figure eminently highlights a dramatic escalation over the first two post-war decades with a decrease during the 90’s. What is critically significant, however, is the two years breach between the first and the second wave. We shall examine the probable motives of the second wave as well as the fundamental factors behind the breach.

The majority of the “boat people” refugees traveled on small boats occasionally with the help of local Vietnamese officials who were bribed to

ignore their departures. Later, several refugees stated that the Hanoi leadership had authorized formal departures in exchange for a set amount. Thousands perished at sea as a result of weather, starvation, or pirate raids (Duiker William, 2006)

1.1.2 The “Boat People” Motives

As mentioned earlier, the second wave of migration or as known the “boat people” began three years after the resettlement of the first wave. This was mainly due to sociological change represented mainly by the “re-education” policy of the -the socialist republic of Vietnam- along with La Duan economic strategies which headed towards socialist reconstruction.

According to William Duiker, Ho Chi Minh offered the vision for an independent Vietnam, while Le Duan and other leadership successors took the necessary measures to turn that vision into a reality (Duiker, 2000, p. 2). General Secretary Lê Dun outlined the objectives of economic reunification for both the north and the south of Vietnam during the first session of this new assembly in June 1976, He stated, “the north must continue speeding up the task of building socialism and improving socialist production relations; the south must proceed simultaneously on the task of socialist transformation and the task of socialist building.” (Dang, 2018, p. 26)

In post-war Vietnam, economic growth drastically recessed as Le Duan and his followers' conservatism adopted an isolationist attitude towards the international community. Accordingly, this period was characterized by commitment, obstinacy, deception, and paranoia. Indeed, Le Duan approached the economic sector through Stalin's ideology for the most of his time as the VCP's general secretary. (Asselin, 2001, pp. 25-26) Probably, one of the darkest pages in Le Duan rule was the punitive agrarian measures against land owners in the south who dominated rice milling as well as retail trade. Before considering the post-war reforms, highlighting former land tenure patterns, carried out by the previous consecutive governments in the south, shall be instructive.

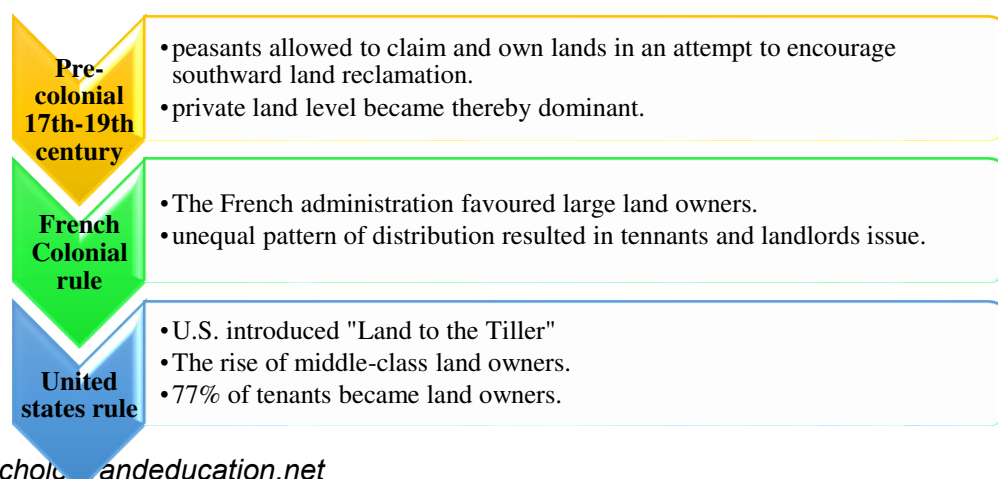


Figure 2 land tenure patterns in pre-war Vietnam (Dang, 2018, pp. 22-24)

The General Secretary attempted to eliminate the vestiges of the colonial and feudal tenure of the land in its totality mainly the "Land to the Tiller"¹ implemented by U.S. government. Le Duan's administration, which adopted a new name, issued a new currency in 1975 and inaugurated land holding confiscation against over million ethnic Chinese who dominated rice milling and wholesale and retail trade. The landless peasants along with urban citizens considered "non-productive" were relocated in New Economic Zones "NEZ" (Chan, 2006, pp. 66-67). William J. and Bruce M. delineated the NEZ,

"... Agricultural settlements established by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) to relieve the refugee problem in the cities after the Vietnam War. The concept had originated in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the 1960s when economic planners promoted the construction of centers at the district level to combine both agricultural and manufacturing activities... their nearly one million peasants had been resettled from the crowded Red River Delta to underpopulated areas in the mountains by the end of the war."

According to the aforementioned, we may conclude the following:

- Confiscating large lands to the tenants was probably based on expectations that such a strategy would be rewarded by increased popularity
- NEZ scheme was an attempt to reconcile and rapidly promote the agricultural economy.
- NEZ established in "underpopulated areas and mountains" were unquestionably of abominable conditions.
- Social life in the south became comfortless.

In the light of the previously mentioned, punitive measures adopted by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam were the major reason of the second wave of refugees. Both ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese found refuge in sea boats. Initially, Dozens of individuals paid boat owners to transport them in relatively small boats of no longer than twenty feet in length. (Chan, 2006, p. 67)

¹ Any direct action by a government to change who owns land in a country. For example, a government may confiscate property held by large, foreign corporations and distribute it among poor and small farmers ("Land to the Tiller").

A second fundamental motive behind the “boat people” crisis was the “re-education camps”. Few days after Saigon’s fall, the communist officials made an announcement on the radio that intellectuals including professors, policemen, and military officers were highly required to gather at specific location to attend “re-education “sessions. According to the misleading announcement, the latter would not exceed forty days. Accordingly, most of the concerned assumed they had better cooperate. Unexpectedly, the intellectuals were transported to camps most of which were located in the south. High ranking officials of the fallen regime, however; were transferred to northern camps. (Chan, 2006, pp. 65-66)

As described by one Vietnamese woman: “It was difficult to leave the place where we had always lived and where our ancestors were buried. My father explained to us that it was not safe for us to stay, that the communists would make life unpleasant for us.” (Colette Marie McLaughlin, 2022, p. 51)

Scholarly literature on the re-education camps is relatively scarce as “communist countries either never documented those events or never allowed access to such documents” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 159). The political detainees were subjected to drastic conditions including hard labor, starvation, and more importantly the political indoctrination (Chan, 2006, p. 66). Some re-education camps intellectual detainees who settled in the United States quickly published memoirs about their camps experiences.

The dissenting voice of the Vietnamese society in United States played a decisive role in releasing a considerable number of prisoners. The Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) was established in 1977 by Khc Minh Th, a social worker in Virginia, to fight for the release of her husband and other prisoners incarcerated in reeducation centers. The group quickly gained popularity, and the sight of military wives pleading to be reunited with their husbands who had served the country with loyalty convinced Reagan's State Department that their welfare was of "special humanitarian concern," a sign that the country's guilt had not yet been fully atoned for. Under political pressure, and in order to avoid high death tolls, camps’ wardens released numerous detainees after years of incarceration. (Nguyen, 2017, p. 125).

Manifestly, statistics about “the reeducation camps” shall forever remain ambiguous as it the case for eminent prisons nowadays such as Guantanamo in Cuba. “There is no consensus about how many people were “re-educated.” The government claimed that they numbered only forty thousand to fifty thousand, but a former RVN officer who made a systematic study of the camps estimated

there were somewhere between three hundred and forty thousand and four hundred thousand.” (Chan, 2006, p. 66).

In summary, the economic and political reformation measures taken by the communist government in South Vietnam drastically engulfed the country and promoted the rise of the boat people crisis. In research conducted by Centrie on “re-education camps” refugees freed after an average of five years incarceration, he evidently argued that the detainees’ families reported a total reversal of family income with the communist nationalization of all property and business, along with Vietnamese government separation of family members from one another. Measures as such granted a total elimination for possible threat for the communist government (Centrie, 2004, p. 198).

1.3 US legislative verdicts

The postwar turmoil was brought the American home front. The propaganda of the “boat people” not only inaugurated a decades-long public debate about American’s humanitarian obligations but questioned the rationale of such a quagmire as well. Before discussing the extent to which the issue engulfed the American society, an overview on the chronological executive and legislative responses towards both “land” and “boat” people shall be constructive.

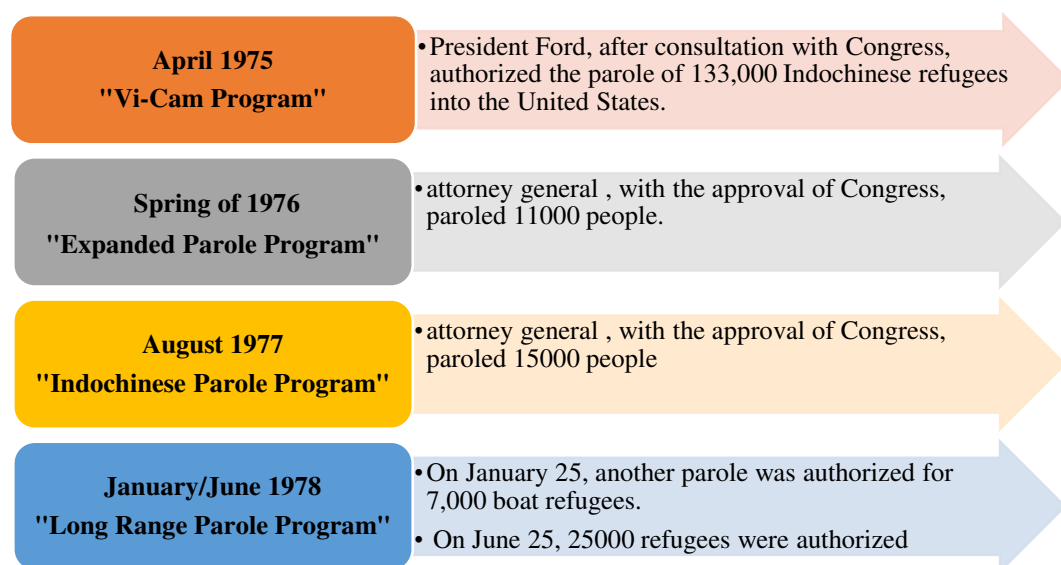


Figure 3 U.S. Parole Actions for Indochinese Refugees (United States Congress, 1974, p. 49)

The previous figure not only represents the rapid measures taken by the United States but also reflects the increasing media and parliamentary attention to asylum seekers especially with the limited resettlement slots available.

In light of the aforementioned facts, the U.S. State Department was alerted to impose curbing measures. Four categories were established to prioritize to admit:

- Priority I was for people with close relatives in the United States.
- Priority II was for former employees of U.S. government agencies.
- priority III pertains to people who had been "closely involved with U.S. policies or initiatives". People who had held positions before to 1975 in the governments or military forces of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, as well as those who had worked for American businesses or organizations or had been trained in the US, fell under this group.
- Priority IV served as a catch-all category for anyone who had not yet been approved for resettlement by another nation or who did not meet the requirements for entry under priorities I, II, or III and who, "for compelling reasons, should be allowed parole on humanitarian grounds."
- The number of priorities were later expanded to six. Ultimately, seven percent, five percent, eighty five percent, and three percent of the fifteen thousand slots approved in August 1977 went to Priority I, Priority II, Priority III, and Priority IV, respectively (Chan, 2006, p. 69).

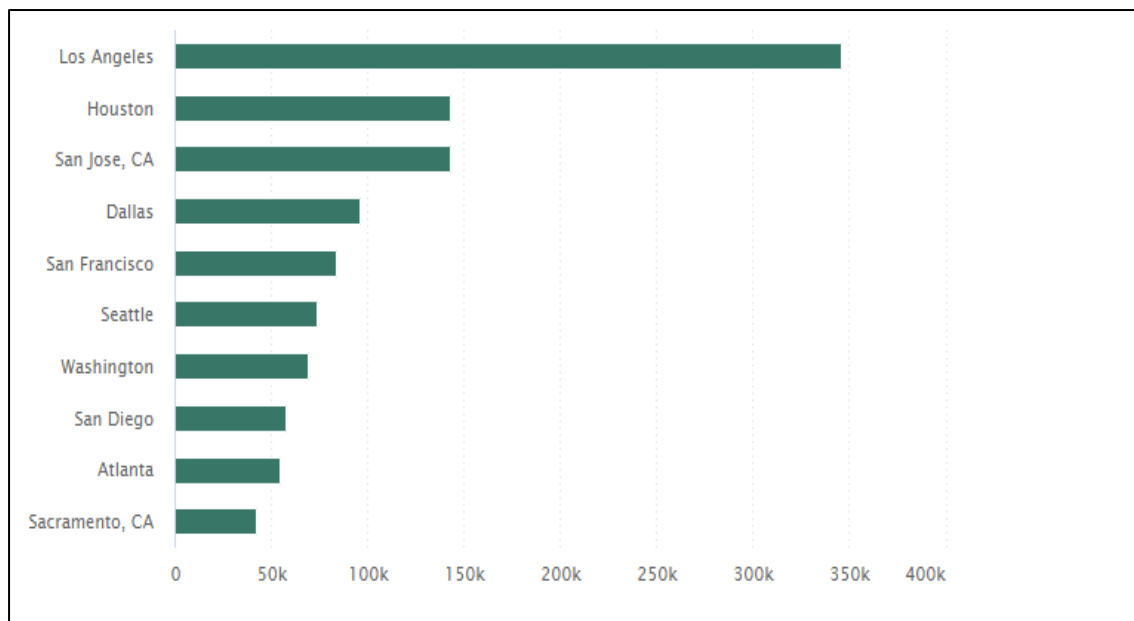
The clumsy efforts of the reconciliation program culminated in constructing small Vietnamese societies in which language, traditions, and other cultural aspects lived on. According to research from *Migrant Networks and Trade: The Vietnamese Boat People as a Natural Experiment*, immigrants are fundamentally differentiated from native populations regarding the ties with their home nations. Such connections which are kept strong by a shared language and regular information exchanges, strengthen bonds between nations and serve as an essential conduit for immigrants to foster long-term development.

2. Constructing a Vietnamese Community

Concomitant with the increasing waves of migration is the construction of ethnic enclaves. The latter functioned as solace and comfort for the alienated

refugees and evoked the ancestral realm of the Vietnamese identity for their hybrid children.

Large Vietnamese enclaves were settled in southern California, primarily in Orange County, which is still home to the largest concentration of Vietnamese in the United States, as well as in and around other cities such as Houston; Portland, Oregon; and New Orleans. In the Washington, D.C., area, most Vietnamese refugees settled in Northern Virginia, predominantly in Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church, mainly for financial reasons (O'Connell, 2018, p.



36). The following figure shows the top metropolitan areas of residence for Vietnamese in the United States, 2019

Figure 4 Top Metropolitan Areas of Residence for Vietnamese in the United States, 2019 (Budiman, 2022)

According to the Pew research center, most Vietnamese enclaves are settled in California counties. Similarly, Washington state and surrounding peripheral areas attracted a large number of Vietnamese refugees.

In 1989, the states with the largest Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian communities were Texas, 66,200; Washington, 41,400; California, 40,400 (Centrie, 2004, p. 55). “Little Saigon” was later the informal appellation designated for these enclaves. They were also called little Hanoi or little Vietnam according to the political history. The next section, we shall focus on the most prominent Vietnamese enclaves and the political as well as the economic transformations caused by such settlements.

2.1 Arlington: a place to call home

Cultural and linguistic barriers exacerbated the ravages of migration. Accordingly, ethnic enclaves were homogeneous residential areas which reflected a prophetic endeavour to struggle for social identity. (Colette Marie McLaughlin, 2022, p. 51). “Embassy officials pointed refugees toward Northern Virginia, and Arlington offered the availability of sponsors such as the Catholic Church, as well as the availability of affordable housing,” Kim A. O’Connell stated in “Echoes of Little Saigon,” (O’Connell, 2016)

Amongst the early ethnic enclaves was Arlington, Virginia. The area became a salvation for Vietnamese refugees fleeing Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War. The county's history is closely tied to that of Washington, D.C., but it has a unique and important story all its own. Today, Arlington is one of the most diverse cities in the nation.

The 26 square miles county, which was originally designated as Alexandria County until 1920, used to be a rural region with farmland and some modest houses. However, the county began to rapidly urbanize due to three main reasons:

- Around the second world war, the construction of the Pentagon drew thousands of federal workers to the Area (O’Connell, 2018, p. 34).
- The Vietnamese Asylum seekers after the end of the American Vietnamese war found shelter in Arlington due to the proximity to the capital and the availability of U.S. sponsor services. (O’Connell, 2018, p. 34).
- “It looks like a hurricane went through because there was just so much debris on the ground related to metro construction,” says local historian Kim O’Connell. Accordingly, affordable commercial rents were abundantly available (From Little Saigon to Eden Center: The Story of Northern Virginia’s Vietnamese Community)

By early 1975, two Vietnamese grocery stores were established: Saigon Market and Vietnam Center. According to Washington Post in 1981. Dung Luong who helped to establish Saigon market declared to the Washington post in 1981 that they “wanted to stay together-to form something like a Chinatown”. In 1977, the Pacific department store opened doors in Clarendon. Consequently, shops and restaurants pertinent to the Vietnamese culture soon spread adding another cultural layer to the county significance (O’Connell, 2018, pp. 36-37). Early significant achievement of “Little Saigon” in Arlington include the following:

- The Vietnamese Community Center established at Arlington's Page elementary schools. Vietnamese resources were included in Public Schools' English as a second language program. (O'Connell, 2018, p. 39).
- The Indochinese Refugee Cooperative Education: the program was inaugurated to meet the educational challenges of refugee children "with limited amounts of education, with little exposure to Western technology and organizations, and often from preliterate societies." (O'Connell, 2018, p. 38).

In the late 1970's, however, Clarendon had fallen into a period of decline. Rents increased following the county authorized redevelopment plan and the construction of the Clarendon Metro station in 1979. Prices were thereby unaffordable and a substitute for Clarendon was indispensable. (Morawski, 2021).

2.1.1 American Eden Arcae

Around 1982, a group of Vietnamese businessmen ceased their funds and bought a dilapidated grocery store in Falls Church, some five miles west of Clarendon, with the intention of establishing a new "Little Saigon" that they would name Eden Center. The Eden Arcade, a once-notable shopping district in Saigon that has since been razed, inspired the center's name. Many Vietnamese in the neighborhood, who had often relocated further into the western suburbs of Washington, found the site to be handy. According to Dr. Joseph Wood, a geography professor, 60% of the local Vietnamese population in 1984 resided three miles or less from Eden Center. (O'Connell, 2018, p. 39).

2.1.2 Reviving Little Saigon

There have been numerous initiatives recently to honor the intangible history of Arlington's Vietnamese community, some of which are connected to the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 2015. These have included storytelling, displays, and activities that took place in Little Saigon's original setting.

The director of Virginia Tech's Urban Planning program, Dr. Elizabeth Morton, organized her graduate students to do more than a dozen oral history interviews with Vietnamese community members in 2014. Interviewees discussed their experiences in Little Saigon as a company owner, customer, or employee as well as how they left Vietnam and settled in northern Virginia. The Arlington Public Library's Center for Local History now has the collection of

oral history interviews both in audio and transcript form. (O'Connell, 2018, p. 40).

Similarly, The Clarendon Metro Station Plaza was transformed into a temporary public art piece in 2015 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon. Arlington County employees collaborated with a local Vietnamese artist, Khanh Le, on the project, which was unveiled in a public ceremony. Le reconstructed Clarendon's post-Vietnam War appearance using three-dimensional miniature structures made from old pictures of Little Saigon. (O'Connell, 2016).

2.2 Orange County: Desperate Turned Successful

In 1989, the Little Saigon California was among the states with the largest Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian communities with a critical mass of 40,400 asylum seekers (Centrie, 2004, p. 55). What makes Little Saigon an outstanding example of a modern, thriving Asian American enclave although constructed from the ground up?

- Vietnamese Americans have benefited from supportive government policies and a vibrant co-ethnic group in becoming a significant part of American society (Kula, et al., 2021, p. 15).
- Vietnamese immigrants are substantially more likely to become naturalized citizens of the United States than the entire foreign-born population. Vietnamese immigrants made up 76% of American citizens as of 2019, compared to 52% of all people who were born abroad. (Batalova, 2023).
- The Vietnamese initially did not engage in direct competition with other parties for the commercial interests of major groups leaving it. Other Asian ethnic groups posed a minor threat to their political dominance. (Võ, 2008, p. 88).
- Little Saigon's original location was built in a deteriorating region; thus, the newcomers were able to rehabilitate it without being hindered by nearby businesses. (Võ, 2008, p. 88).
- Vietnamese were not immigrants by choice, but rather by necessity, as refugees. (Kula, et al., 2021, p. 8).
- Vietnamese immigrants were not required to deal with the power dynamics of deeply embedded generations or preserve pre-existing ethnic places, a situation that new immigrants frequently face while reviving established sites like Chinatowns. (Võ, 2008, p. 88).

2.2.1 Establishing an Ethnic Economy

The strength of co-ethnic communities solely pertains to its potential human, social, and cultural sources within each immigrant group. Such sources can provide a buffer for barriers encountered by new immigrants including linguistic, educational or economic opportunities. (Kula, et al., 2021, p. 3) Accordingly, due to their socioeconomic diversity, the Vietnamese asylum seekers managed to mobilize an interconnected economy.

The first wave Vietnamese refugees with less-education, lower-skills, and limited English proficiency played a decisive role in creating Little Saigon and sustaining the cultural dimensions through groceries, stores, and restaurant (Võ, 2008, pp. 90-91). According to statistics from the United States Census bureau, the Vietnamese represent over 16% of the total Asian owned business in 2016.

Ethnic commercial sites became more than a place to shop. They were described by Vietnamese as a factor in their lives. Users in ethnic commercial places can combine both shopping with retreat to a community where their people and culture are the norm. Little Saigon offers commuters a space where they may engage in enjoyable activities with other immigrants, which strengthens their sense of community and decrease their sensation of alienation as cultural outsiders and strangers in their new environment. (Colette Marie McLaughlin, 2022, pp. 54-55).

Although adult refugees who were previously professionals initially relied on welfare assistance and took menial jobs, and occasionally had to retrain for new occupations, they were able to rise by using their human and social capital. This gave the initial group a solid platform on which to reconstruct their lives, and some of them, together with their children, contributed to the establishment of the economic and political system that would eventually give rise to Little Saigon. They also managed to help later comers who had lower social and educational skills (Võ, 2008, p. 91).

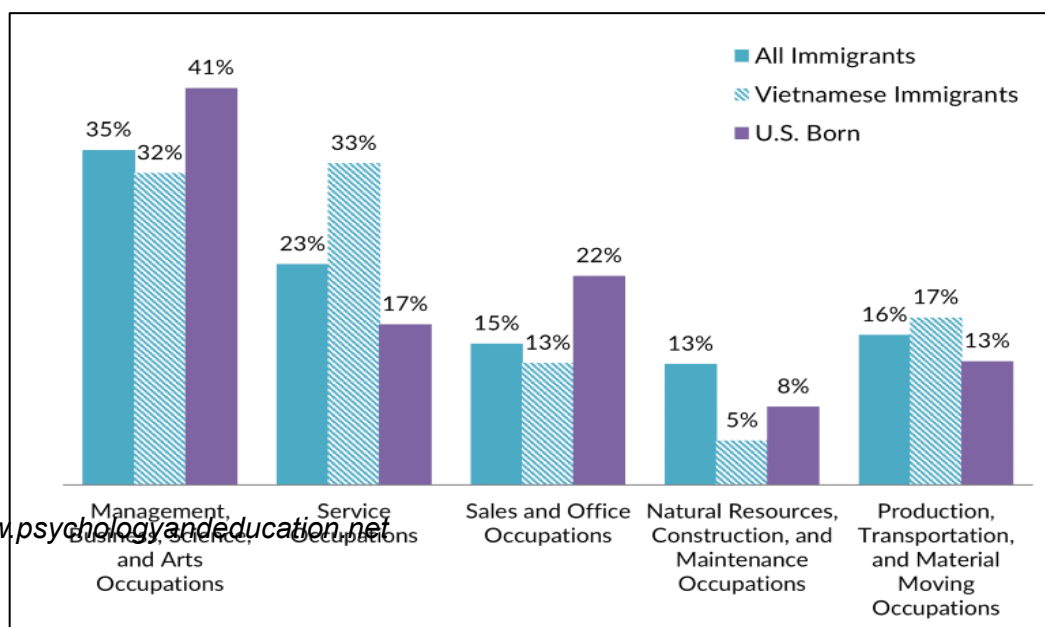


Figure 5 Employed Workers in the U.S. Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2019. (Batalova, 2023).

Compared to other ethnic groups, the Vietnamese are predominantly engaged in civilian labor force. The majority of jobs held by Vietnamese immigrants 33% were in the service sector as well as management, business, science, and artistic occupations with 32 %. Compared to employees who were born in the United States and all other immigrants. As a matter of fact, “Vietnamese Americans comprise 37 percent of licensed technicians in the U.S. and 80 percent of the industry in California” (Võ, 2008, p. 93).

The unrivalled cultural events of the Vietnamese enclaves, such as Tet, the annual Vietnamese New Year's festival, draw large crowds of tourists. Another draw to the region is the Vietnam War memorial, one of the few in the nation to honor both American and South Vietnamese soldiers. It was built in Westminster in 2003. Little Saigon is no longer just a "refugee" enclave, as evidenced by more upscale enterprises including high-end restaurants and cosmetic surgery centers run by Vietnamese people. (Võ, 2008, p. 93).

2.2.2 Political Power

It was not until recently that the Vietnamese received potential political influence. A variety of convenient features have led to such ascendancy, we can namely mention the economic thriving which not only engulfed the Vietnamese but the general community as well.

According to the U.S. Census, close to 60 percent foreign-born Vietnamese are naturalized citizens, which is higher than the U.S. total of foreign-born at 40 percent and Asian Americans at 50 percent. Accordingly, the Vietnamese community grew to become a major voting block.

Numerous Vietnamese Americans run for office in each election period, but many are not serious contenders because they lack political experience, connections, and funds; however, even these non-contenders have gained a surprising number of votes and some have won as well by capitalizing on the co-ethnic voter base.

What the Vietnamese community observes is more Vietnamese running for elected positions and that it is possible for them to win, which is an incentive for others to run for political office and reinforces the perspective that as a community their participation can make a difference (Võ, 2008, p. 95).

In the 2004 General Election in Orange County, there were approximately 79,558 Vietnamese Americans registered to vote, which is about half of the population, and 52,508 who voted. The Orange County Registrar of Voters publishes official election materials in Vietnamese and has increased efforts to recruit more Vietnamese bilingual poll workers. (Võ, 2008, p. 96).

The ethnic media, especially local newspapers, news magazines, and radio television stations have highlighted politicians and political controversies, as well as encouraging electoral participation. Innovative strategies, such as songs that encourage voting accompanied by traditional music played on the radio, were employed. (Võ, 2008, p. 97).

Notable urban sociology figures including Ferdinand Tönnies, Louis Wirth, and the German sociologist George Simmel, argued that urbanization creates alienation and a sense of social vacuum (Zweibach, 2002, pp. 42- 43). However, social and political solidarity among Vietnamese enclaves surprisingly prevailed. Henceforth, the unrivalled American Vietnamese involvement in politics and economy, in merely three years, reflects a story of success.

Conclusion

Little Saigons are one of the largest and most influential ethnic communities in United States. The Vietnamese astoundingly broke away from predominantly stereotypical representations of dispossessed refugees. They jump-started an ethnic economy; ended, unemployment, relocated themselves in unprecedented numbers, and permanently altered their social status as a racial minority in American life. At the nexus of tradition, cultural diversity, and economic and political thriving, the Vietnamese can be depicted as “a model minority”. The ultimate establishment of the pillars of Vietnamese enclaves was an inconsistently long process for such achievements were unquestionably concomitant with a prophetic endeavour to struggle against the imaginable ravages of displacement.

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