

# 1. A COMMUNITY PROFILE

The Communist take-over by force of South Vietnam in 1975 and the subsequent exodus of Vietnamese out of their homeland have resulted in thousands of Vietnamese being accepted for resettlement in Australia.

Prior to this crucial national event, the Vietnamese people lived separately under the two antagonistic political regimes of North and South Vietnam, set up by the Geneva Accords of 1954. This international agreement marked the end of the first phase of the Vietnam War from 1946 to 1954 against French rule and led to the mass exodus of nearly one million people from the North to the South. The years 1954-60 were the period of peace and reconstruction for both regions. After this, the second phase of the Vietnam

War commenced, which was known by Hanoi as the war for national liberation from U.S. imperialism and by Saigon as the war of self-defence against Communist subversion and invasion. It culminated in bombings over North Vietnam and Communist offensives in the South. Its conclusion was the control of South Vietnam by the North and, with the fall of South Vietnam, the collapse of neighbouring Laos and Cambodia to the Communist movements in those countries.

The conclusion of the war and the reunification of the divided nation under Communist rule have brought about several waves of Vietnamese people from both North and South fleeing to the West.

In Australia there are 194,855 Vietnamese-speaking persons in the total national population of 19,855,288 (1). They concentrated largely in the Local Government areas of Fairfield, Bankstown and Marrickville in Sydney; Footscray, Richmond and Springvale in Melbourne; West End in Brisbane; Girrawheen in Perth; and Woodville in Adelaide. It is the clustered pattern of residence of this minority group, rather than its size in relation to the total population, that has highlighted its visibility to the larger society.

In their dealings with the government and other ethnic groups, Vietnamese refugees are represented by a nationwide organization, the Vietnamese Community in Australia, and in each state by its state chapter. Under this umbrella organization, there are many smaller groups, political, social and professional, whose

activities are either within a state or nationwide. The community leaders and figures, whether elected or not, have accepted as collective goals the stabilization and development of their emerging community and the promotion of initiatives and efforts for the restoration of political freedom and liberal democracy in their homeland.

In terms of duration of residence the Vietnamese ethnic group is a young community and has been faced with various problems of settlement and adjustment such as language barriers, cultural differences, difficulties in finding employment, geographically split families and serious conflicts within the family as a result of migration and, above all, the pain and distress of coming to grips with the multiple traumas experienced prior to arriving in Australia.

In spite of these difficulties and adversities, Vietnamese people have participated in almost all spheres of Australian life and in their operation as a group have presented unique characteristics, political, social and cultural.

Politically, the Vietnamese community in Australia is firm in its anti-Communist attitudes and active in its campaign for a free and democratic Vietnam (2). No consensus is reached, though, among community members as to how to drive Communism out of Vietnamese society and to restore freedom, democracy and human rights for the Vietnamese people. Some still believe that armed revolution is the only way to remove the Communist Party from power. Many, having been exposed to a more liberal and democratic political system in Australia and having witnessed the collapse of many Communist states without the use of much

military force by anti-Communist movements, are keen on peaceful political solutions such as negotiations, reconciliation and collaborative conflict resolution. Others claim that improving the living standards of the people will gradually undermine Communist ideology and dictatorship and so they favour economic and technical aid from the West for Vietnam and the lifting of the trade embargo by the United States.

In terms of employment, Vietnamese people are now employed in almost all areas of industry in both the government and non-government sectors. However, the unemployment rate among Vietnamese-born is high compared with the rate in the wider Australian community. Of those who are employed, many are underemployed and the overwhelming majority are in positions with responsibilities to carry out pre-defined technical

or manual tasks and to perform duties or roles that require supervision. Few have succeeded in obtaining higher executive and managerial positions that entail responsibilities for policy planning, decision-making and program supervision. (3)

Due to the lack of employment or suitable employment, a drop in their socio-economic status after migrating and the satisfaction found in “being their own boss”, a small number of Vietnamese have decided to take up self-employment through setting up small businesses, offices and shops. Those in the medical profession are the most visible with private practices in many areas dominated by Vietnamese (4). No less visible are the Asian groceries, bread shops and small restaurants. The number of Vietnamese small business operators is, however, small compared with

the rest of the Vietnamese population (5).

With regard to education, which is highly valued in Vietnamese families and communities, there are records of both encouraging successes and discouraging failures. Vietnamese prowess in the academic field is well known and the Australian learned society is beginning to recognize that “Viet refugees (are) in the academic ascendant” (6). Not all of them have succeeded, though, and many have gained their success at the price of enormous hard work, deferment of immediate gratification and, for some, excessive worry about failure. It is also shown that Vietnamese students do best in analytical subjects, especially in mathematics and science, and somewhat less well in English and subjects that require strong verbal participation. This may explain why they figure disproportionately in many

secondary and tertiary education courses.

A comprehensive view of Vietnamese community life in Australia cannot ignore its mode of cultural expression. This is not to be found in ubiquitous grocery stores, take-away restaurants and bakeries, which are just temporary and preliminary ventures for those who have come here empty-handed and after some years of working in factories have managed to save a small capital to start small businesses. Nor should it be found in frequent vehement, sometimes violent, political meetings, conferences and demonstrations to protest or to support, which are merely reactions or responses in the short-term to the political situation in the home country.

In order to have a better view of significant Vietnamese cultural expression (7), one should look

at the array of mass media organs: newsletters, newspapers and magazines, which come out daily, bi-weekly, weekly, monthly, or periodically. In Sydney alone, there are no less than four daily and weekly papers, which have a nationwide circulation. These newspapers include, in addition to the news and information, short stories, poems, literary and art reviews and commentaries. One should also look at the numerous works or publications by poets, writers and authors, some of which have a readership in other resettlement countries as well. The subject matter of many of these works is mainly the lost homeland now relived in remembrances and past images. Together with the increase in creative writings and artistic activities is the grouping or re-grouping of young talents or veterans in performance or production groups: literary clubs,

performing and fine arts groups, choirs and music bands.

In short, Vietnamese presence in the Australian ethnic press and ethnic literary and artistic activities is surprisingly rich in quality as well as quantity and has significantly contributed to the successful resettlement and well-being of Vietnamese residents.

A quote from an outsider (8) describes succinctly the inner resources and deeper values displayed by the Vietnamese in exile:

*While they and their families have worked to be self-supporting, the (Vietnamese) artists paint, draw, make prints and continue, as serene as if there had been no drama in their life.*

*It is wonderful to see the art of Vietnamese who go deeper than*

*the grubby surface of the day, and whose works go beyond the leaking and crowded boats, beyond loss and death, into serenity. This celebration of life has always been the source of the creative urge.*

*Escapist? No. It is an elemental and courageous understanding of reality, where the human spirit harvests beauty from despair.*

As a young ethnic group, will the Vietnamese be successful in their transitional process of relocation and social adjustment? This would depend on their predisposition to change, their level of expectation and the orientation of the host society (9).

From a Vietnamese perspective, most Vietnamese did not change their country of origin voluntarily, but on the other hand are happy to consider Australia as their permanent settlement location.

Their expectations are high – unrealistically high perhaps – but these are being steadily achieved by their young people in education and employment. They arrived at the time of Australia's economic recession with high unemployment and inflation, but their arrival also coincided with a new national policy of multiculturalism proclaimed as a framework of inter-group relations in this racially and culturally diversified nation.

Thus looking ahead, these new citizens have good reasons to believe that their ethnic community will soon be well established, like other older ethnic communities, and will be able to contribute its talent, energy and determination to the advancement of the new homeland, AUSTRALIA.

## Notes

- (1) 2006 ABS Census. Note the difference between these categories:  
 Vietnam-born: 159,850 = 0.8% of total population.  
 Vietnamese ancestries: 173,700 = 0.9% of total population.  
 Vietnamese spoken at home: 194,855 = 1% of total population.
- (2) Please note that the emblem used to represent the Vietnamese community is the Freedom and Heritage Flag, of yellow background with three horizontal red stripes. This is the flag that has been used in Vietnam since the early years of the 20th century. The red flag with a yellow star at the centre, the emblem of Communist Vietnam, is not recognised by Vietnamese refugees.
- (3) The 1991 Census shows that 60.7% of the Vietnam-born in NSW were wage and salary earners in low skilled or unskilled jobs and only 4% were managers and administrators with another 11.7% being professionals and para-professionals. In: "Indochinese Refugee Families in Australia: A Multicultural Perspective" (published in *Cultural Diversity and the Family*, Ashfield: Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, 1997). <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~yeulee/Other/Indochinese%20refugees.html>
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Greg Sheridan, Viet Refugees in the Academic Ascendant, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, February 7-8, 1987, p.10.

- (7) This paragraph was written with special reference to Frank Nhat Trinh, A Decade of Vietnamese Cultural Integration in Australia, Paper presented at the International Conference on a Decade of Indochinese Resettlement, Chicago, Illinois, April 18-20, 1985.
- (8) Ruth Talovich, Voices: Émigré Artists, *Thế Kỷ 21* (21<sup>st</sup> Century), June 1993, p.45.
- (9) Judith T. Shuval, Refugees – Adjustment and Assimilation, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Macmillan, New York, 1972, pp 373-377



# VIETNAMESE DEMOGRAPHICS \*

<u>POPULATION</u>			% of Australian population
Australian Population		19,855,288	100.0%
Vietnam born		159,850	0.8%
Vietnamese Ancestries		173,700	0.9%
Vietnamese Speaking		194,855	1.0%

  

<u>GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION</u>	Population	Vietnamese speaking Males	Vietnamese speaking Females	Vietnamese speaking Total	% of population
ACT	324,034	1,463	1,601	3,064	0.9%
NSW	6,549,179	35,891	38,696	74,587	1.1%
NT	192,898	396	363	759	0.4%
Queensland	3,904,537	8,433	8,711	17,144	0.4%
South Australia	1,514,336	6,752	7,012	13,764	0.9%
Tasmania	476,484	69	63	132	< 0.1%
Victoria	4,932,421	34,773	37,389	72,162	1.5%
Western Australia	1,959,083	6,552	6,691	13,243	0.7%
<b>Total</b>		<b>94,329</b>	<b>100,526</b>	<b>194,855</b>	

  

<u>MAJOR CITIES</u>	Population	Vietnamese speaking Males	Vietnamese speaking Females	Vietnamese speaking Total	% of population
Adelaide	1,105,839	6,624	6,908	13,532	1.2%
Brisbane	1,763,129	7,728	8,097	15,825	0.9%
Canberra	323,058	1,456	1,601	3,057	0.9%
Darwin	105,989	336	312	648	0.6%
Hobart	200,524	50	43	93	< 0.1%
Melbourne	3,592,592	34,240	36,881	71,121	2.0%
Perth	1,445,073	6,295	6,463	12,758	0.9%
Sydney	4,119,189	34,911	37,704	72,615	1.8%
<b>Total</b>		<b>91,640</b>	<b>98,009</b>	<b>189,649</b>	

  

<u>TOP LOCATIONS IN SYDNEY</u>	Population	Vietnamese speaking Males	Vietnamese speaking Females	Vietnamese speaking Total	% of population
Auburn	64,958	789	891	1,680	2.6%
Bankstown	170,489	6,877	7,216	14,093	8.3%
Canterbury	129,963	2,382	2,598	4,980	3.8%
Fairfield	179,892	14,778	15,888	30,666	17.0%
Liverpool	164,602	3,285	3,391	6,676	4.1%
Marrickville	71,812	1,415	1,531	2,946	4.1%
<b>Total</b>		<b>29,526</b>	<b>31,515</b>	<b>61,041</b>	

\*Source: ABS 2006 Census