

From Vietnam *to Canada*

Between 1978 and 1981, several hundred thousand Vietnamese left the country legally or illegally, fleeing repercussions of the Vietnam war. Called the "boat people" for their desperate journeys by sea to safety, almost 50,000 found their way to Canada.

Vietnamese immigration to Canada continued throughout the 1980s and early 1990s under the Vietnamese government's "Orderly Departure Program," allowing families to be reunited and an additional 80,000 immigrants to begin new lives in Canada. In 1991, more than 24,000 Vietnamese had established homes in Toronto.

The challenges faced by these newcomers, the memories they hold of the land and the people they left behind, and the contributions made to Canadian society are celebrated here.



A Portrait of Vietnam



A narrow strip of mountains divides Vietnam into north and south. The Red (Hong) River dominates the north region, the capital city of Hanoi located near its delta.

In the south, the historically rich port of Saigon (today's Ho Chi Minh City) lies at the base of the fertile Mekong River Delta.



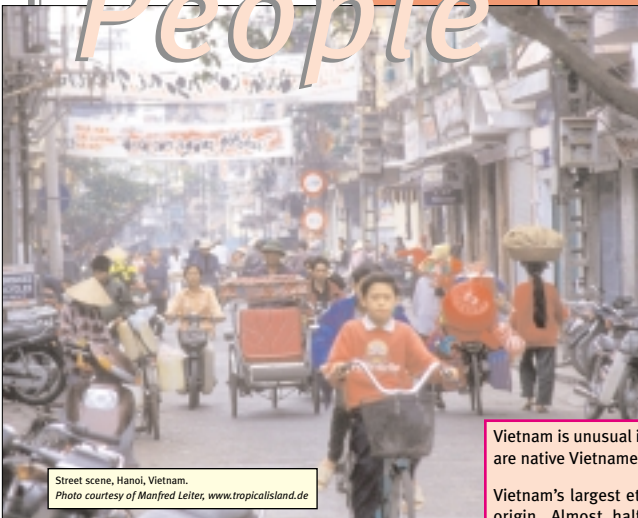
Land

Working in the rice fields, Huế.
Photo courtesy of Manfred Leiter, www.tropicalisland.de

Vietnam today remains largely agricultural. More than three quarters of the population live in rural areas, such as the rich rice-producing regions of the Mekong and Red River deltas.

Rice is the country's most important crop, planted on over 80% of the farmland in Vietnam.

People



Street scene, Hanoi, Vietnam.
Photo courtesy of Manfred Leiter, www.tropicalisland.de

Vietnamese Canadians left behind a rich and diverse landscape. They carried with them cultural traditions and memories that are expressed today in communities across Canada.

Vietnam is unusual in Southeast Asia in that almost 90% of the country's 80 million inhabitants are native Vietnamese.

Vietnam's largest ethnic minority are the "Sino-Vietnamese," Vietnamese citizens of Chinese origin. Almost half of the Sino-Vietnamese population fled the country, together with thousands of native Vietnamese, following the establishment of the Communist regime in the late 1970s.

Journey to Canada

The Nguyen Family's Story



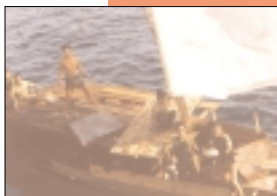
Photo courtesy of Nguyen Tan Dung.

IN DECEMBER 1979, sixteen members of the Nguyen family and eleven of their friends boarded this tiny boat to depart from the city of Rach Gam, Vietnam.

For fourteen days, the boat battled giant waves at sea. "We could see nothing but sea and sky," recalls Nguyen Tan Dung.

As the boat neared Thailand, pirates attacked and robbed passengers of their food and most of their possessions.

Rescue arrived through a fortunate encounter with the ship *Akuna* in January 1980. The crew of the *Akuna* provided their exhausted passengers with food and clothing. The Nguyens travelled on the *Akuna* for a month before finding safe-haven in Thailand.



View of the Nguyen's boat from the *Akuna*. Photo courtesy of Nguyen Tan Dung.



Children being transferred from the Nguyen's boat to the *Akuna*. Photo courtesy of Nguyen Tan Dung.

After the Nguyens disembarked in Thailand, they were transferred to the Songkhla Refugee Camp. They remained at the camp for three months before they were accepted as refugees by the Canadian government.



On the *Akuna*; the Nguyens and their friends pose with the crew of the ship. Photo courtesy of Nguyen Tan Dung.



Nguyen Tan Dung's Identification Card, Songkhla Refugee Camp, Thailand 1980. Courtesy of Nguyen Tan Dung.



Photo courtesy of Nguyen Tan Dung.

The Nguyens with their Canadian sponsors at the airport of Sydney, Nova Scotia in May 1980.

Two years later in 1982, Nguyen Tan Dung sponsored his brother and family to come to Canada.



Photo courtesy of Nguyen Tan Dung.

Between the period of 1978 and 1981, as the Communist regime spread to South Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese left their homeland in search of safety and stability.

The Nguyen family were among those who made the dangerous journey by boat from Vietnam.

Nguyen Tan Dung

Nguyen Tan Dung was a student when he was forced to flee Vietnam in 1979. Arriving in Canada in 1980, he lived in Nova Scotia for seven years before moving to Mississauga in 1987.

Today, Tan Dung works as a Quality Control Inspector in a metal finishing plant. In his spare time, he volunteers at the Vietnamese Community Centre of Mississauga and helps to raise funds to help people the Quang Ngai region in Vietnam.



Building Community

Hoi: Voluntary Associations

Vietnamese immigrants were quick to develop their own voluntary organizations, or "hoi." These groups continue to play a vital role in the community by welcoming and aiding new immigrants and organizing a rich variety of cultural events.

In 1972, a group of Vietnamese students founded the first Vietnamese voluntary organization. The Vietnamese Association provided an opportunity for networking and helped to create a sense of community among Toronto's small population of Vietnamese students. Since that time, over forty Vietnamese voluntary associations have formed in Toronto.



A group of students learn martial arts at a Toronto community centre.



Members of the Vietnamese Women's Association provide tutorial support for students in an after-school homework program.



Members of the Vietnamese Women's Association perform at an annual ceremony to remember the two Trung sisters, who led the first national uprising against Chinese conquerors in 40 A.D.



Here, a group of Vietnamese youth perform a traditional dance for the Vietnamese Elderly Association, 2001.

Hard work, new opportunities

Vietnamese Canadians are employed in virtually all sectors of the economy. Many immigrants who arrived prior to 1975 hold well-paid professional or managerial positions.

Those who arrived after 1975, however, came at a time of economic recession in Canada. Many were forced to abandon their professional trades for less skilled work. Others found that their work experience in Vietnam – in agriculture, fishing, or the armed forces – was not exportable to Canada.



Owning a small business is one way some Vietnamese immigrants created work for themselves. These businesses nourish the community's vitality and provide important goods and services.



Celebrating Culture

Each year, Vietnamese voluntary organizations, teachers and residents organize a wide variety of cultural events. Many events celebrate traditional aspects of Vietnamese culture; others look to build bridges between younger and older generations.



Women perform in an annual ceremony to remember the Trung Sisters, who led the first national uprising against Chinese conquerors in 40 A.D.



Here, a man plays the "Dan Nguyet," a popular Vietnamese instrument named for its moon-like shape.



The majority of Vietnamese Canadians practice a form of Buddhism called "tam giao." Here, Buddhist monks from around the world gather to inaugurate the opening of the Phap Van Vietnamese Buddhist Cultural Centre in Mississauga in June, 2002.

Giving Back:

Contributions to Canadian Society

Kim Cuc Nguyen

Developing a Strong Community

Kim Cuc Nguyen arrived in Toronto with her husband and two children in the Spring of 1979.



Kim Cuc, 2002.

A literature teacher and school principal in Vietnam, Kim found work as a counter clerk for a drycleaners when she first arrived. After obtaining her Ontario teacher's equivalency, she accepted a job with the Toronto District School Board providing settlement support to Vietnamese children in Toronto schools. She worked for the School Board for 18 years before retiring in 2003.



Kim and Anh, 1970.

Beyond her work experience, Kim has been an active volunteer with the Vietnamese community for over 20 years.

A passionate supporter of children and youth, she has dedicated much of her free time to encouraging youth involvement in music.

Kim's community work has earned her three Ontario Volunteer Service Awards between 1992 and 2003; she continues to contribute her time to support the development of her community.

Students perform in a school choir, 2002.



Phan Dam

Excellence in Education

Phan Dam was part of the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants who came to Canada before 1975.

Strong marks in high school earned him a scholarship to study in Australia, and in 1966 he graduated from the University of New South Wales with a degree in civil engineering. He emigrated to Canada with his wife in 1969, and accepted a job as a lab instructor at Centennial College in 1970.

"[Teaching] was a very scary experience for me at first. I had never spoken English in public, and I was sensitive about my yellow skin in a white classroom situation. I spoke very slowly, and I asked my students, 'do you follow my accented English?' They laughed: 'we can hear you alright Phan, just keep talking!'"



Phan Dam with his father, Duy Tao Dam, Montreal, 1985.

The following week I gained enough confidence to start cracking jokes, and I've really enjoyed teaching since then."

Phan went on to teach for thirty years in the Civil Technology program at Centennial. In 1991, he was honoured with a New Pioneer Award for his role in the design of Centennial College's Environmental Protection Technology program.

Phan Dam retired from Centennial College in 2002; he remains actively involved in the Vietnamese community.



Phan Dam with his son, Micheal Dam Hieu Ton, on Michael's wedding day in Mississauga, 2002.

Pham The Trung

Memory and Identity through the Arts

Pham The Trung fled Vietnam with his younger brother in January 1980. After spending five months in a refugee camp in Thailand, he was granted asylum in Canada in June 1980.



A talented artist and sculptor from the age of eight, Pham graduated with honours from the Saigon National University of Fine Arts in 1979.



"Escape to Freedom,"

Pham Tre Trung, 1995. Commissioned by the federal government in 1995, Pham's most famous work commemorates the 20th anniversary of the fall of Saigon.

In the early years in Toronto, Pham found work sculpting mouldings and frescoes for buildings, opening a studio on Dundas Street in 1985.

Since that time, he has established a strong reputation as an artist and sculptor in Canada. His art expresses the history and landscape of his native Vietnam – the rich wetlands of the Mekong Delta where he grew up – and his memories of war and escape. "I was born in war, and I grew up in war," he remembers; "my childhood was lost, but we survived. My memories survived."

Pham was honoured with a City of Toronto Civic Award of Merit in 1997. His work is in private and public collections worldwide.