Strength and Resilience

The Evolution of the Vietnamese Diaspora in Canada

Ginette Thomas, PhD

Prepared for:

The Canadian Southeast Asia Refugee Historical Research Project: Hearts of Freedom

School of Social Work, Carleton University

March 2026

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Aliyah Campbell, MSW Carleton University, for her assistance with the research of resettlement activities across Canada.

ABSTRACT

When Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam, fell to the North Vietnamese army on April 30, 1975, it marked the end of the Vietnam War and precipitated one of the largest refugee crises of the 20th century as millions of people fled communist oppression. In Canada, this moment became a turning point in shaping immigration history. Although the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada had already begun before 1975, it grew rapidly as the country opened its doors to welcome thousands of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the decades that followed.

This paper explores the historical background of Vietnamese migration to Canada, the response of Canadians following the Fall of Saigon in 1975, the resettlement experience, and the contribution of Vietnamese Canadians to Canadian society. The evolution of the Vietnamese community in Canada provides insight into Canada's immigration transformations, and the broader implications of Canada's refugee policies.

The story of how Vietnamese refugees came to Canada—and how their communities developed in the decades that followed—offers an important window into the intersection of humanitarian response, immigration policy, and the resilience of displaced populations.

INTRODUCTION

On 30 April 1975, as North Vietnamese tanks entered Saigon and brought the Vietnam War to an end, thousands of Vietnamese civilians fled the city in search of safety. In the months and years that followed, millions of people across Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos would be displaced, creating one of the largest refugee crises of the twentieth century.

The migration of Southeast Asian refugees to Canada in the 1970s launched an important historical chapter in Canadian history. This migration reshaped social attitudes toward refugees, influenced immigration policy, and transformed Canadian social values. This paper traces the evolution of the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada within the broader context of refugee movements that followed the collapse of South Vietnam and the subsequent waves of migration that ensued.

There already exists a body of historical literature on the migration of refugees fleeing Vietnam to come to Canada following the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, and the unprecedented increase of refugees during the second and third migration waves escaping from the Southeast Asian nations of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos starting in 1979. While a range of scholarly articles and books study the challenges of their resettlement experiences in different communities, the literature has tended to focus either on specific local settings within Canada, on individual ethnic groups, or on both (Molloy et al. 2017, 457).

The scale and urgency of these migration movements presented Canada with new and complex questions that could not be addressed without a solid understanding of the broader shifting political, social, and institutional context. In response, government agencies were the first to produce a growing body of studies on resettlement processes, most of which treated refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as a single group. Academic research soon followed, focusing on issues of resettlement, adaptation, and integration, and examining the experiences of individual refugee communities in different regions of Canada (Dorais 2000).

While many studies examine the resettlement experiences of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in specific cities or regions, what that body of research reveals is a patchwork of separate and distinct experiences that vary across time and geography across the country. Although they do not offer a description of a typical resettlement experience for a Vietnamese refugee arriving in Canada at that time, an analysis of these studies do offer an emerging pattern

of regional similarities and differences through which the collective features of the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada can be studied. Building on this historiographical context of 1975, this paper focuses specifically on the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada in the following sections:

I-Historical Background; II-Vietnamese Migration Patterns; III-Current Vietnamese Population in Canada; IV-Vietnamese Resettlement Experiences; and V- Conclusion: Contributions of the Vietnamese Diaspora.

I- HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Political Factors Leading to the Fall of Saigon

The Vietnam War was deeply rooted in Cold War dynamics, with the United States (US) supporting the anti-communist government of South Vietnam, while the Soviet Union and China backed communist North Vietnam.

Following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, US. military forces withdrew, leaving South Vietnam vulnerable to renewed North Vietnamese aggression. In early 1975, North Vietnamese forces launched a final offensive, swiftly overwhelming South Vietnamese defenses. By April 1975, the lack of US intervention and military material, and the rapid collapse of South Vietnamese forces, led to the dramatic and chaotic evacuation of Americans and their allies.

North Vietnamese army tanks rolled into, and captured, the South Vietnamese capital city of Saigon on 30 April 1975. It marked the end of the Vietnam War and on 2 July 1976, led to the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam which unified the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) under a single communist government (Molloy et al. 2017).

It marked the end of the Vietnam War and on 2 July 1976, led to the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam which unified the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) under a single communist government (Molloy et al. 2017).

Humanitarian Crisis in Southeast Asia and Refugee Exodus

The geopolitical shift resulting from the communist takeover of the former South Vietnam in April 1975 and the concurrent communist takeovers in the neighbouring countries of Cambodia and Laos, ignited a refugee crisis of unprecedented proportions. With the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia

and the Pathet Lao in Laos, the new communist regimes in all three countries engaged in widespread execution, persecution, incarceration, forced labor, and political purges.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that three million refugees fled Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the years between 1975 and the mid-1990s. They did so by land and by sea, often facing perilous conditions. The boat people crisis - the estimated 1.5 million people who escaped Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos by boat - witnessed people braving treacherous waters, and piracy, in overcrowded vessels. The UNHCR further estimates that 200,000 to 400,000 men, women and children perished at sea, succumbing to drowning, starvation, or attacks by pirates (Cutts 2000).

Cambodia's situation was especially catastrophic. The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia launched a genocidal campaign that led to the deaths of approximately 1.7 to 2 million of its own Cambodian people, representing approximately 25 percent of the population. At the same time, many Cambodians attempted to escape to overcrowded and disease-ridden refugee camps in Thailand. Similarly, Laotian refugees, particularly those from the Hmong ethnic minority who had allied with US forces, also fled in large numbers to Thailand where 10 percent of the Laotian population faced years of uncertainty in refugee camps (Cutts 2000) (Kiernan 2003, 586).

Global Response to the Refugee Crisis

This unprecedented huge movement of people fleeing Southeast Asia prompted a global humanitarian response. International organizations like the UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM), that is now known as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), played crucial roles in coordinating relief efforts. On 20 July 1979, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) convened a conference in Geneva on the Refugees and Displaced Persons in Southeast Asia. These talks resulted in agreements for increased international cooperation and led to the establishment of asylum processing centers in Southeast Asia, as well as a more structured approach to refugee resettlement. At the conference, Canada's foreign minister, Flora MacDonald announced Canada would accept 50,000 government assisted refugees (GAR) and privately sponsored refugees (PSR) (UN General Assembly 1979).

Despite these efforts, many refugees languished in camps for years, and some nations, including Thailand and Malaysia, adopted pushback policies of turning boats away or forcing refugees into detention centers. The global response, while significant, was sometimes criticized

for being slow and inadequate in addressing the full scale of the crisis (Molloy et al. 2017, 293-312).

Nevertheless, western nations, particularly the US, Canada, Australia, and France, led resettlement efforts by accepting hundreds of thousands of refugees. According to the UNHCR, the US alone took in approximately 1.4 million Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees between 1975 and the early 2000s. Between 1975 and 1980 Canada and Australia each resettled around 70,000 refugees, while France, the former colonial ruler of Indochina, also accepted significant numbers (Cutts 2000). By the time Canada's Indochinese refugee program ended, Canada had accepted 210,000 Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians including over 60,000 under family reunification provisions (Molloy et al. 2017).

The displacement of millions of people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos not only altered regional demographics but also transformed global refugee policies and humanitarian efforts. While the world did respond with resettlement and international cooperation, the scale of suffering and loss remains a sobering reminder of the consequences of war and political upheaval.

II- MIGRATION PATTERNS

Background on Canadian Immigration

By way of context for the migration changes precipitated by the Fall of Saigon in 1975, it should be noted that until 1970, Canada accepted as refugees only Europeans displaced by World War II or escaping the Soviet empire. Non-Europeans were not accepted as refugees until 1969 when Canada ratified the 1951 United Nations Refugee convention and 1967 Protocol, and formally made it possible to accept non-Europeans a few months later in 1970. It should be noted that although Canada only opened its doors to non-European refugees in 1970, it was possible for non-Europeans to *immigrate* to Canada starting in 1962. They were accepted as landed immigrants and needed no further status adjustment (Glassco, 2020).

The first arrivals

Beginning in 1950, the very first Indochinese[1] to arrive in Canada were a handful of Vietnamese male students who had received scholarships from the Catholic Church to study at Université Laval in Québec City and Université de Montréal. By the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, the student group began to grow rapidly. A few Cambodians and Laotians joined the South Vietnamese immigrants who remained by far the overwhelming majority. Although some graduates returned home at the end of their studies, many others preferred to settle in Canada where the economy was expanding. They easily found work as university professors, engineers, computer scientists, or professionals in the public service. "On the eve of the events of April 1975, Canada had about 1,500 Vietnamese residents, 200 of Cambodian origin, and as many of Laotian origin" (Dorais 2000a).

According to Luttmer, during the 1950s the communist regime in North Vietnam persecuted Catholic institutions and communities, confiscating property and suppressing religious freedoms. Following the division of Vietnam into two states, North and South, twenty Carmelite nuns, members of the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, were accepted by Canada. They settled in regions of Québec, particularly in the city of Montréal and the Lac Saint-Jean area, where they established convents and continued their contemplative life.

Other religious orders also sought refuge in Canada during this period. The Congregation of the Holy Cross, the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, the Lovers of the Holy Cross, the Dominican Sisters, and the Sisters of Providence were notable communities who also escaped North Vietnam's oppressive political environment. These groups settled in Toronto, Ottawa, and Windsor in Ontario, Québec City, Montréal, and Sherbrooke in Québec, and Vancouver in British Columbia, where they established educational institutions, convents, and missions that enriched Canada's religious and cultural landscape. The migration of these religious communities before 1970 not only preserved their faith and traditions, but they also contributed to the development of Canada's Catholic education system, social services, and spiritual life. (Luttmer 1968).

At the beginning of 1975 there were approximately 800 Vietnamese in Montréal, most of whom were living near the Université de Montréal (Dorais and Richard 2007, 23). In his book *Price of Freedom: Exodus and Diaspora of Vietnamese People,* Lâm Vinh Dinh also estimates

[1] Individuals living in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were referred to as Indochinese at that time as they were under French Indochina colonial rule.

that there were approximately 1,500 self-supported Vietnamese students in Canada at that time, mostly in Ontario and Québec. They either had not returned to Vietnam because of the war, or had married Canadians, or were working in educational and technical fields. There were also students in Europe, Australia, the US and Japan choosing to not go back to Vietnam, who found ways to emigrate to Canada (Lâm 2017, 154).

Shift in Migration Patterns

In the period from 1975 and into the 1990s, migration patterns from Vietnam underwent a significant shift as large numbers of refugees fleeing from Vietnam arrived in Canada in three major waves. These waves of arrivals were in response to geopolitical factors at the international level, and to changes in immigration policies in Canada. The small Vietnamese population that had already made its home in Canada before 1975 played a significant role in the resettlement of the refugees that would follow and actively participated in the resettlement process by welcoming family members and others to their communities.

The First Wave of Refugees (1975-1978)

Lâm captures the spirit of what he identifies as the first planeload of Vietnamese refugees that launched the first migration wave to Canada following the Fall of Saigon: "On May 6, 1975, The Air Canada plane landed at Dorval Airport ((Montréal) with 100 Vietnamese looking bewildered, carrying things with both hands, shivering in their thin and not warm enough clothes although spring has already begun in this Land of Snow. This group of exiled people that night began the resettlement in this frozen land, Canada, the country that most Vietnamese never thought of before the tragic event of April 30, 1975" (Lâm 2017, 153)

From the beginning of May 1975**,** Immigration Minister Robert Andras agreed to accept any refugees with relatives in Canada plus 2,000 Vietnamese without relatives (as Convention refugees) who had been evacuated by the US to refugee camps in Subic Bay (Philippines), the US Territory of Guam, and on the US mainland. In addition, Canada made provision to accept as Convention refugees 1,000 refugees in Asia. During 1975 and 1976, approximately 5,608 refugees from Vietnam (the majority were Vietnamese with only a few Cambodians and Laotians) arrived in Canada and settled mostly in the province of Québec, primarily in Montréal, with 3,100 arriving in 1975 and 2,508 arriving in 1976. Since most of the refugees in the first wave were educated in

French, or had relatives who were studying or working in the province, Québec was the first location of choice for many of these refugees. Between 1975 and 1978, approximately 1,500 people from this group chose to resettle in Ontario, mostly in the Toronto area (Molloy et al. 2017, 43-45).

This first wave of Vietnamese refugees**,** and especially those who settled in Québec, reported no major difficulties in rebuilding their lives in Canada. A major factor was their educational level, fluency in French, and their motivation to succeed with minimal assistance. Voluntary organizations and the Canadian government provided temporary accommodation upon arrival with up to two months' rent, as well as assistance in finding employment. In Québec, children were placed in special transitional classes to prepare them to enter regular classes after one year, and adults were financially supported to study French for 30 weeks if they chose to improve their language skills. The Montréal economy was booming at that time, and many found employment on major projects like the 1976 Summer Olympics and the construction of the James Bay dams (Dorais 2000a).

New legislation: the 1976 Immigration Act.

It had long been acknowledged that the 1951 Immigration Act was out of date. Immigration Minister Robert Andras, who authorized the admission of the first wave of refugees in 1975, oversaw a drastic revision of Canadian immigration law in the 1976 Immigration Act which, among many changes, included numerous provisions related to refugees for the first time in Canadian history. Two of these changes were of critical importance to what would follow as conditions in Southeast Asia worsened.

In the first change, while the law created a Convention refugee class for refugees with a well-founded fear of persecution, it also gave the government the power to create "Designated Classes" for people whose admission was in accordance with Canada's traditional concern for the displaced and persecuted. Given the growing refugee crisis in Southeast Asia, the government approved the *Indochinese Refugee Designated Class* which recognized the dire circumstances refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos faced and exempted them from having to individually prove they had a well-founded fear of persecution. This greatly simplified the selection process (Molloy et al. 2017).

The second change was the creation of the new *Private Sponsorship Program* for Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSP), which enabled Canadian citizens and organizations to assume direct responsibility for refugee resettlement. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was the first to recognize the potential of private sponsorship, and in April 1979 signed the first "master agreement" with the federal government whereby the MCC accepted liability on behalf its individual congregation. Numerous faith communities quickly negotiated similar agreements.

As circumstances in Southeast Asia deteriorated, media coverage galvanized public support. Canadians who stepped forward to organize sponsorship groups, like Mayor Marion Dewar of Ottawa, Howard Adelman of Toronto, and William Jantzen of the Mennonite Central Committee, played a critical role in getting sponsors and refugee resettlement off the ground (Molloy and Simeon 2016) (Molloy et al. 2017, 66).

While the Canadian government set annual quotas for Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) under the *Government Assistance Program*, it only projected targets for private sponsorships. Therefore, the overall number of privately sponsored refugees was contingent upon the level of engagement by individual Canadians to support the new arrivals. Given that the majority of the Southeast Asian refugees that were admitted during this period arrived as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR), this new model of private sponsorship demonstrated the effectiveness of private-public partnerships in humanitarian resettlement and set a precedent for future refugee admission policies (Casasola 2016).

In addition to the government-assisted and privately sponsored categories, the new law also made provision for refugees that were already in Canada to sponsor their relatives (Relative Sponsored) (Molloy et al. 2017).

The Second Wave of Refugees: The Boat People (1978-1980)

In the late 1970s, the new Vietnamese communist government implemented policies that led to mass persecution, forced labor camps, economic hardship, including the ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese citizens, many of whom were stripped of their businesses and expelled. Facing repression and fearing for their lives, hundreds of thousands of people fled Vietnam by sea, leading to what became known as the boat people crisis. Canadian visa officer Tove Bording is credited with coining the term 'boat people' to distinguish those individuals who fled Vietnam by boarding

boats heading to sea, from the overland 'truck people' who fled Vietnam in trucks, crossing into Laos and seeking asylum in Thailand (Molloy 2014).

Vietnamese refugees escaping in overloaded, unseaworthy vessels often fell victim to storms, starvation, and piracy. If they survived, they were confined to overcrowded refugee camps in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, while awaiting resettlement. According to the UNHCR, by July 1986, 250,000 Vietnamese refugees had perished at sea and more than 2.5 million Indochinese were resettled, mostly in North America, Australia, and Europe. And more than 525,000 refugees, mainly from Cambodia, were repatriated either voluntarily or involuntarily. (Cutts 2000, 51).

With the Communist government's policies of re-education and retribution, and the economic collapse of the country, many Vietnamese felt that they had no choice but to flee despite the risks to life at sea. It was the events surrounding the ship *Hai Hong* that brought heightened media attention in Canada and served as a major turning point in Canadians' perceptions of the plight of the refugees. On 15 October 1978, the *Hai Hong*, an old rusty freighter that was about to be scrapped, left Vietnam with 2,654 people on board. The majority were Vietnamese of Chinese origin. After battling typhoon Rita, when the *Hai Hong* arrived in Malaysia on 9 November 1978, the Malaysian government refused to let the ship land. Many of the 1,280 children that were on board were sick, and contagious diseases were spreading. Lâm acknowledges that "It was in this tragic situation that the Government of Canada decided to take in 604 persons, and the US, France, Germany, Switzerland and Australia quickly followed its example" (Lâm 2017, 159).

Media attention to the *Hai Hong* incident and the response of the Government of Canada to urgently assist the stranded refugees underscored the plight of the refugees. In December 1978, following the arrival of the *Hai Hong* refugees and an urgent consultation hosted by UNHCR in Geneva, the Canadian government initiated the second wave by instructing the immigration department to admit 5,000 refugees from Southeast Asia. Following the election of the Conservative government of Joe Clark in 1979, Secretary of State for External Affairs, Flora MacDonald and Employment and Immigration Minister Ron Atkey decided that Canada needed to do more. In June 1979, they increased the previous commitment from 5,000 government assisted refugees (GAR) to 8,000, and they called for 4,000 private sponsorships refugees (PSR).

On 20 July 1979**,** the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) convened a conference in Geneva on Refugees and Displaced Persons in Southeast Asia. The result was an agreement for

increased international cooperation, for the establishment of asylum processing centers in Southeast Asia, and for a more structured approach to refugee resettlement (UN General Assembly 1979). At the conference, foreign minister, Flora MacDonald further announced that Canada would accept 50,000 government assisted refugees (GAR) and privately sponsored (PSR) refugees consisting of the 8,000 refugees already in the pipeline, as well as an additional 21,000 to be sponsored by private groups that would be matched by 21,000 government assisted refugees (Molloy et al. 2017, 118-120). Then, in the following year, Immigration Minister Lloyd Axworthy added a further 10,000 government assisted refugees (Molloy et al. 2017, 168-170).

With this incentive, Canadians responded to the challenge, opened their doors, and welcomed the refugees. According to Lâm, it was this phase of migration that helped the Vietnamese community to fully develop as to support the new arrivals to settle across Canada, with Ontario leading in numbers. There was also a greater diversity in the socio-economic conditions of the refugees during this phase. The main reason is that the majority of these refugees arrived with much less resources because they had lost most of their wealth due to the Communist regime's currency changes, and the payments that they exacted to allow people to get on boats. Lâm argues "That was why many countries in the neighboring seas had refused to let boat people land: the Communists got paid with money from the people they forced out to sea" (Lâm 2017, 158).

The plight of the boat people drew a strong humanitarian response from Canada. According to Molloy, between 1975 and 1980 approximately 70,000 refugees were resettled in Canada, including over 60,000 in 1979-80 alone. Refugees that were accepted into Canada by immigration officers located in refugee camps in Southeast Asia were then flown to reception centres in Canada. The final charter flight of Canada's Indochinese Refugee Airlift program arrived at the Longue-Pointe reception centre in Montréal on 8 December 1980, completing the resettlement of 60,049 refugees admitted under the 1979–1980 program. These included 4,697 Cambodians, 9,849 Laotians, 42,664 Vietnamese and 2,839 others (Molloy et al. 2017, 183-185).

For the period of 1979 -1980 when the Canadian government implemented the sponsorship program and admitted a total of 60,049 refugees from Southeast Asia, the total breakdown by category is shown in the table below, as reported in the publication *Indochinese Refugees* (Employment and Immigration Canada 1982). However, this publication does not offer data

specific to the breakdown of private sponsorship vs government assistance for the Vietnamese refugees. The numbers in the table below include Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians.

Indochinese Refugees Landings by Category January 1, 1979 – December 31, 1980		
	No. of Refugees	% of Total
Privately sponsored	32,281	53.8
Relative-sponsored	1,790	3.0
Government-assisted	25,798	43.2
Total	60,049	100.0

(Source: Employment and Immigration Canada. 1982. Indochinese Refugees: The Canadian Response 1979-1980; p. 20).

The Private Sponsorship Refugees program allowed for direct community involvement in refugee resettlement. Faith-based organizations, local businesses, and individual families contributed funds and resources to support incoming refugees. This program remains a cornerstone of Canada's refugee policy today.

The Third Wave: Refugees and Family Reunification

The peak of the migration movement to Canada, in terms of the number of refugees, was from 1981 to 1989, the period that corresponds to the continued high movement of boat people and growing collaboration by governments and agencies around the world to address the crisis.

Following the end of Canada's initial resettlement programs of 1979-1980, Canada's *Annual Refugee Plan* was implemented to shift the focus to admitting refugees under the provisions under the UNHCR' Vietnam *Orderly Departure Program/Family Reunification Program*, and later, the *Comprehensive Plan of Action* that were in place between 1981 and 1989. In Canada, the movement of Vietnamese refugees from Southeast Asia now consisted of two program components.

The first component involved the relatives of Vietnamese refugees who were already settled in Canada. They could apply under *the Family Reunification Program (FRP)* which operated under

terms of the UNHCR's *Orderly Departure Program (ODP)* that was negotiated between the UNHCR and the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1979.

The second component, later in the 1980s, involved refugees who were still in camps in Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines that had been admitted to the camps under Canada's Indochinese Designated Class and later identified as Convention refugees. They could apply under the UNHCR's *Comprehensive Plan of Action*.

The UNHCR data for those years do include separate numbers for Vietnamese refugees. There were 36,934 additional government-assisted and privately sponsored Vietnamese refugees that arrived in Canada during this period (see table below).

1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989 To July
6772	4095	3181	3607	4176	3848	3940	4571	2744

(Source: UNHCR Document VII Departures from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for Countries of Resettlement. As of July 1989)

In order to facilitate planning and coordination with UNHCR, in December 1979 the federal government, the provincial governments, and civil society institutions involved in refugee sponsorship and resettlement, developed an *Annual Refugees Plan*. The plan established the number of government-assisted refugees to be admitted each year, and sometimes signaled the number of privately sponsored refugees it expected civil society to sponsor.

Vietnam's Orderly Departure Program /Family Reunification Program

On 30 May 1979, at a meeting in Indonesia, the UNHCR and Vietnam signed an agreement on orderly departures. The goal was to allow people to leave Vietnam legally, to reduce dangerous boat departures, and to facilitate family reunification. People admitted through the Canadian component of the program were processed directly in Vietnam, through Canadian visa offices, and without going through refugee camps. Arrivals in Canada throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s included relatives of Vietnamese refugees already in Canada, and humanitarian cases (Kumin 2008) (Robinson 1998) (Molloy et al. 2017).

Vietnam appears to have agreed to this arrangement since it allowed people who were family members of refugees resettled in developed countries to leave Vietnam, thereby lifting a burden off the Vietnamese state. The Canadian component of the Orderly Departure Program

(ODP) was known as the *Family Reunification Program* (FRP). The FRP became a major element of the Vietnamese movement of refugees to Canada in the 1980s (Kumin 2008; Bersma 2024).

The *'Orderly Departure Program/Family Reunification Program'* sparked a major shift in the management of potential refugees as it played an important role in safely facilitating the migration of Vietnamese relatives to Canada. They could now travel from Vietnam to Canada on organized flights, rather than risking departure by boat, and enduring confinement in refugee camps (Robinson 1998, 295) (Kumin 2008).

It was during this phase that Vietnamese communities in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia experienced significant population growth (Hou 2017). Lâm argues that although previous refugees had to struggle to overcome many difficulties, they were lucky because they had escaped before the Communists took over, and they were able to receive some assistance at the beginning of their resettlement. The Vietnamese coming to Canada in this third wave had to rebuild their lives at older ages, and in a more difficult economic situation. However, the days of humiliation under the Communist regime had made them more resilient and more determined to succeed (Lâm 2017, 159).

In the late 1980s, a number of people leaving Vietnam from Communist North Vietnam, after a long time in refugee camps, especially after the refugee camp in Hong Kong was closed, were accepted in Canada on humanitarian grounds. A number of refugees in this group had suffered greatly over the years in the camps, and they faced challenges to integrate into Canadian society. According to Lâm, "They lived in ghettos, some engaged in outlawed activities (such as growing marijuana), and connected with people immigrating to Canada from communist North Vietnam. Unfortunately, … (they) have caused misunderstandings and discrimination while the Vietnamese community has grown in courage and honour" (Lâm 2017, 160).

Since 2001, immigrants from Vietnam are entering primarily on the family reunification programs and as economic immigrants (Dorais, 2000).

Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA)

By the late 1980s there was a growing perception that many of the refugees arriving in asylum countries were motivated by economic factors rather than fear of persecution. Under UNHCR supervision, negotiations between Vietnam, the countries of asylum, and the countries of

resettlement led to the creation of the *Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA)* at a conference in Geneva 13-14 June 1989. (UN General Assembly 1989, Document A/Conf.148/2).

Under the CPA, it was agreed that the existing refugee camp populations (57,600 including approximately 50,000 Vietnamese) would be resettled even if they had already been refused by at least one resettlement or fell into low priority categories. People arriving after the CPA cut-off date would be screened for compliance with the 1951 UN Refugee definition. Those found to be Convention refugees would be eligible for resettlement. Those found not to be Convention refugees would be required to return to their home country where their safety would be monitored by UNHCR. The CPA was controversial, but once the process became known in Vietnam the number of new arrivals declined quickly. The UNHCR requested Canada to accept 10,000 refugees under the CPA. Between 1990 and 1997, following the adoption of the *Comprehensive Plan of Action*, Canada continued to resettle refugees from camps in Southeast Asia, admitting approximately 15,000 additional Indochinese refugees between 1990 and 1997. The majority were Vietnamese. (Robinson 1998, Appendix 2) (Hathaway 1993).

Québec Government's 1978 Provincial Immigration Program

Having already established the ministry of Immigration Québec in 1968, the provincial government was already involved in negotiations with the federal government for certain immigration powers. In February 1975, it signed the Andras/Bienvenue Agreement, the first formal agreement between Canada and Québec regarding immigration policy that recognized Québec's role in selecting immigrants (McCallum 2024).

With the growing Southeast Asian refugee crisis, Québec and Canada signed the Cullen/Couture agreement in 1978 which allowed the province to proceed with cornerstone of its immigration policy, the integration of new immigrants into Québec's francophone society. The key provisions included: the right to select immigrants; authority to station Québec immigration officials abroad to select immigrants; and, authority to set French-language proficiency as a key selection criterion for admission to Québec. Under the terms of the Agreement, the federal government agreed to accept Québec's choices, but remained responsible for setting overall immigration levels, medical and security screening and issuing visas. The Vietnamese boat people crisis was the first significant event in which Québec could use its powers of selection at the

international level, working in the field alongside federal immigration officers (Molloy et al. 2017, 347-348).

With the significant influx of Vietnamese refugees between1975-1985, the Cullen-Couture Agreement enabled Québec to establish its own sponsorship programs which facilitated the resettlement of approximately 10,000 Southeast Asian refugees, a substantial portion of whom were Vietnamese. Similar to the federal programs, Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) to Québec received financial aid from the provincial government to cover rent and living expenses for up to one year, or until they secured employment. The province developed tailored orientation programs about Québec society, emphasizing French language acquisition and cultural orientation. Québec's Private Supported Refugees (PSR) encouraged private organizations, religious groups, and community associations to sponsor refugees and foster a supportive environment. Sponsors welcomed refugees and provided food, clothing, and other living expenses for up to one year or until the refugees became self-supporting. Sponsors also assisted refugees in securing housing, accessing public services, and integrating into the community (Molloy et al. 2017 pp 79-80).

The Cullen-Couture Agreement was later superseded by the 1991 Canada-Québec Accord that further entrenches Québec's immigration policies and allows the province to set the number of immigrants it wishes to receive and ensures the numbers of immigrants are proportional to the population of the province (McCallum 2024). The Cullen-Couture Agreement allowed Québec to work alongside the federal immigration programs and play a significant role in Canada's urgent response to the evolving humanitarian crisis in the 1970s and 1980s.

III CURRENT VIETNAMESE POPULATION IN CANADA

In the 2021 Census, 275,530 individuals identified as having Vietnamese ethnic origins, which represents approximately 0.76 percent of the national population. The population distribution across provinces/territories and major metropolitan areas as outlined in the table below (Statistics Canada 2024).

Province/Territory	Vietnamese Origin		Metropolitan Area	Vietnamese Origin
Ontario	122,735		Greater Toronto	82,225
British Columbia	51,890		Greater Montréal	38,660
Alberta	45,570		Greater Vancouver	34,915
Québec	39,395		Calgary Region	21,010
Manitoba	7,290		Edmonton Capital Region	14,180
Saskatchewan	4,730		Ottawa-Gatineau	9,650
Nova Scotia	1,374		Winnipeg Capital Region	5,580
New Brunswick	1,295		Waterloo Region	5,555
Nfland &Labrador	730		Hamilton	4,855
Prince Edward Island	225		London	3,110
Northwest Territories	175		Windsor	2,555
Yukon	90		Guelph	2,425
Nunavut	0			
Canada (Total)	**275,530**			

Source: Statistics Canada. 2024.

IV- VIETNAMESE RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES

There exist many studies on the resettlement experience of Vietnamese refugees in Canada. They are, however, primarily regional and local in scope, and are limited to the resettlement of refugees in specific locations. Recognizing that they represent only a snapshot of different perspectives, this section highlights selected resettlement experiences of Vietnamese refugees in six urban areas: Québec City, Montréal, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria. It is expected, however, that the descriptions of local integration initiatives in these areas are reflect the experiences of Vietnamese refugees who settled in many other communities across Canada.

RESETTLEMENT IN QUÉBEC

Under the Cullen-Couture Agreement (described in Part I), the Québec government had dispatched provincial immigration officials directly to refugee camps in Southeast Asia to work alongside federal immigration agents, and to expedite the selection of refugees destined for Québec. By 1982, Québec had resettled over 10,000 Vietnamese refugees through its provincial sponsorship initiatives, accounting for almost a quarter of all refugees arriving in Canada during that period. Montréal, as the largest Francophone city in North America, became a primary destination. They were welcomed with financial and other supports to help them adapt to Québec society (Molloy and Simeon 2016; Dorais 2000a).

For refugees with little to no prior exposure to French, the provincial government established intensive language training programs. The *Centre d'Accueil et de Référence Sociale et Économique pour Immigrants* (CARI) provided French language immersion courses, employment-related language training, and community language exchange programs with Québécois volunteers to encourage conversational practice. Cultural training workshops described Québec customs, including adapting to a cold climate and enjoying outdoor winter social activities such as sledding and ice skating The provincial government also partnered with local businesses to create job training programs and apprenticeship programs in skilled trades. Small business grants were available for refugees interested in entrepreneurship, leading to a thriving Vietnamese business community in Montréal and other cities (Dorais 2000a).

By the late 1980s, Vietnamese-Québecois had established strong social and economic networks and later influenced Québec's approach to other refugee groups, shaping future immigration policies. The legacy of these programs is the thriving Vietnamese-Québécois

community which continues to celebrate its heritage while contributing to Québec society and economy (Chan and Dorais 1998).

Québec City

Although the current Vietnamese population of Québec City remains quite small[2], the city nonetheless played a unique resettlement role, as they welcomed some of the first Vietnamese refugees in the immediate aftermath of the Fall of Saigon. Many of the early Vietnamese immigrants in the 1950s who had settled in Québec, became an existing support network to welcome this first groups of refugees. Lâm's account of the first planeload filled with Vietnamese refugees landing in Montréal on 6 May 1975 expresses a hint of the anticipation for those who were welcoming them (Lâm 2017, 153).

In 1975, Québec City welcomed 232 Vietnamese refugees. Many had family residing in Québec, were affluent, well-educated, and fluent in French. Between 1979 and 1980, during the second wave, Québec City accepted 660 more Vietnamese refugees. Many were ethnically Chinese, did not speak French or English, and did not have relatives in Canada. This second wave of refugees faced greater challenges to enter the local labour market. As a result, many left for Toronto or Montréal in search of better opportunities in industrial employment (Dorais 1991).

These early arrivals to Québec City valued the preservation of social connections and maintaining close contact with relatives in Vietnam, as many aimed for family reunification. More broadly, Dorais' findings indicate that their formation of strong intracommunity friendship networks alleviated some of the early linguistic and cultural disparities that could have otherwise given rise to social isolation among the general population. They established religious networks. Buddhists met bi-weekly in self-established communal spaces. The Québec City Vietnamese Catholic Community (QCVC) was established.

Other Associations such as the Vietnamese Scouts and Guides and Lac Long Soccer Club followed, and 100 Chinese-Vietnamese joined the existing Québec City Chinese Association (QCCA) which was mainly comprised of immigrants from Hong Kong and China. With the support of the Canadian and Québec governments, Vietnamese people in Québec City used their

[2] The 2021 Census population of Vietnamese origin in the province of Québec is 39,395, of which 38,660 reside in the Greater Montréal Area, leaving 735 in the rest of the province. No count was included for Québec City.

social capital and community organizations, such as the QCVC, to maintain cultural continuity (Dorais 1991).

Montréal

With a current Vietnamese population of 38,660, in many ways the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in Montréal mirrored that of refugees who resettled in Québec City, as they relied on the same provincial sponsorship programs and access to provincial resources and opportunities. Where the experience differed is the bilingual environment of Montréal that presented both challenges and opportunities.

The main difference that presented a challenge for resettlement, is that the city of Montréal is comprised of strong French and English cultural communities and educational systems. Often, community associations and religious organizations operated in both languages, facilitating broader integration. Dorais and Richard note that the Vietnamese community's emphasis on education and adaptability enabled many to become proficient in both languages, thereby enhancing their socio-economic prospects and fostering connections across Montréal's diverse communities (Dorais and Richard 2007).

Chan and Lam focused on the adaptation of Cantonese-speaking Vietnamese refugees including the quality and dynamics of the sponsor-refugee relationship and the challenges of past experiences and trauma. Sponsor-refugee relationships were generally perceived as positive, although private sponsors were considered more nurturing, intimate, and involved than government sponsors. Privately sponsored refugees believed the PSR program to be superior to the GAR program, with the benefit of having frequent sponsor visits and assistance with basic necessities such as housing and the job search process. While mainly positive, especially for those accepted under the PSR program, the dynamic between sponsor and refugee could also cause challenges.

As some refugees lacked full proficiency in English or French, language barriers adversely affected the relationship and frustrated interactions. Still, it was felt that their sponsors generally understood them. Beyond language barriers, the broader cultural differences between the Vietnamese and Canadian cultures, as well as a lack of familiarity with each other’s backgrounds, means that both the sponsors and refugees entered into the sponsor-refugee relationship as total strangers.

"While Vietnamese-Chinese have acquired only a rudimentary knowledge of the political system, ideology, geography, climate and social etiquettes of Canada through reading books and information pamphlets distributed by the Canadian Embassy which visited refugee camps outside Vietnam, what the average Canadian knows about Vietnam consists primarily of mass-media presentations of stereotypic, exaggerated and over-generalized images of the country and its people" (Chan and Lam 1983, 5)

One of the obstacles that refugees faced was to shed the negative associations attached to their identity while adapting to a completely new environment and an unfamiliar community.

There were instances of present-day events in their new surroundings that sparked trauma from past events. For example, two refugees noted having violent dreams triggered by Quebec's May Referendum in 1980, which evoked memories of Vietnam's divided government, and fears of re-experiencing being a refugee in the event of Quebec's independence from Canada. Despite general feelings of safety and security in the present, past trauma triggers highlight the challenges for refugees that were forcibly displaced faced, living with a profound sense of loss at the same time as they attempt to integrate into Canadian society (Chan and Lam 1983, 9-11).

Dorais' research of Vietnamese resettlement in Québec confirms the significance of religion as a key coping mechanism. As early as the summer of 1975, the Montréal Vietnamese community created a small group of Buddhist followers, and by1982 they had fundraised enough to purchase a synagogue and transform it into a Buddhist temple. By the 1990s Vietnamese Buddhists had established eight temples and three meditation centres, and Vietnamese Catholics had established an ethnic parish called the Mission of the Holy Martyrs of Vietnam. Their faith was not only an invaluable part of their escape from Vietnam, it also signified the immense importance of faith after resettlement (Dorais 2007, 62-63).

Montréal's Vietnamese community worked diligently to form their own associations to preserve their cultural heritage and to provide mutual support. The *Vietnamese Community of Canada* (Montréal Region) is a non-profit organization founded in 1976 that continues to serve as the official representative of the Vietnamese community in Montréal. It offers services in both French and English to assist with integration and cultural preservation.[3] The *Vietnamese Community Resources Center* in Montréal was established in 1983 by a group of Vietnamese

[3] For more information: https://vietnam.ca/lich-su-cong-dong/

immigrants to provide essential services and resources to Vietnamese immigrants and refugees, particularly those who faced challenges in adapting to a new environment and assist with access to housing, employment, legal aid, and language training.[4]

More recently, the *Vietnamese Cultural Center of Canada* was established in 2017 as a non-profit organization to fostering cultural exchange between Canadians and Vietnamese individuals by promoting educational programs, arts exhibitions, cultural workshops, and community events designed to engage both the Vietnamese diaspora and the broader Canadian public.[5]

RESETTLEMENT IN THE REST OF CANADA

Upon their arrival in Canada, Vietnamese refugees who did not settle in Québec were directed to various communities nationwide, and their resettlement experiences were shaped by the distinct cultural and social dynamics of the regions in which they settled. This section offers a selection of resettlement experiences in just a few urban locations. Resettlement challenges and successes encountered in one region are likely to have been shared by other communities.

For resettlement outside Québec, the program guidelines were as described under the federal sponsorship programs. The following examples in Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver, and Victoria were selected as they offer snapshots of the overall Canadian response to the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in Canadian urban areas.

Ottawa

Now home to 9,650 Vietnamese residents in the greater area of Ottawa-Gatineau area, the city of Ottawa depicted a pivotal moment in Canadians' response. While on holidays, Mayor Marion Dewar watched the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Southeast Asia on television. On 27 June 1979 she held a private meeting with community, church and business leaders to discuss if the city could help. All were supportive of settling refugees in Ottawa, and when a federal immigration official noted that Canada had already accepted 4,000 refugees from an expanded 8,000-person quota, Mayor Dewar reportedly responded, "Fine. We'll take the other 4,000" demonstrating the City's Ottawa's strong commitment to refugee resettlement. She then held a public meeting to

[4] For more information: cvietrc.ca
[5] For more information: https://centreculturelvietnamien.ca/en/the-vietnamese-cultural-center/

gauge the extent of the public's interest. Expecting about 500 people to attend, as many 3,000 showed up to hear the Mayor and experts speak (Powell 1979).

The result was Ottawa's *Project 4000*, a municipal initiative committed to resettling 4,000 Southeast Asian refugees. The City allocated $25,000 to launch the project which quickly became a non-profit organization supporting Ottawa residents who agreed to sponsor refugees under the federal private sponsorship program. The organization operated with a small staff, and volunteers managed six key committees: accommodation, health, education, employment, media relations, and fundraising. A local property development company donated office space, and later, *Project 4000* volunteers established clothing and furniture depots to support refugees and others in need.

Sponsors were legally responsible for supporting a refugee individual or family for up to one year. Beyond financial support, sponsors played a crucial role in integration by securing housing, enrolling children in schools, arranging healthcare, and facilitating language training. For many refugees, arriving in Ottawa was a profound cultural shock, particularly in winter.

According to Carrière, *Project 4000* contributed to the growth of private sponsorship groups across Canada to 7,000. Its success also influenced the federal government's decision to increase the national resettlement target to 50,000, as noted by cabinet minister Flora MacDonald. By the project's conclusion in 1983, approximately 2,000 refugees had been sponsored to Ottawa through the federal Private Sponsorship Refugee (PSR) program, while 1,600 arrived through the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) program. An estimated 60 percent of the 3,600 refugees resettled in Ottawa through Project 4000 were Vietnamese, suggesting that around 2,160 Vietnamese refugees arrived in the city as part of the initiative (Carrière 2016).

Before the completion of the project, Ottawa's Vietnamese population had formed the *Vietnamese Canadian Federation (VCF*) that expanded into an umbrella organization for mutual aid associations within the other centres of Vietnamese population across the country. These local associations work collaboratively under the VCF's guidance to provide services such as settlement assistance, cultural preservation, and community development programs (Dorais 2000a).

Toronto

The Greater Toronto Area is home to 82,225 residents, which according to the 2021 Census, represents the largest municipal population of Vietnamese origin in Canada. In June 1979, Howard Adelman, professor at York University, convened a meeting in his Toronto home to assist groups

of private citizens in sponsoring Southeast Asian refugees. The outcome was *Operation Lifeline,* which played a key role in mobilizing private sponsorships for refugees in Toronto and beyond. Volunteers undertook various roles, including answering phone calls, managing donations, and maintaining records for new chapters. Within two weeks, *Operation Lifeline* had established fifty-eight chapters across Canada. The overwhelming volunteer response highlighted the Canadian public's commitment to assisting refugees when they arrived in Canada (Adelman 2021).

While *Operation Lifeline* and various community organizations spearheaded much of the resettlement efforts, the City of Toronto also played a supportive role. Municipal authorities collaborated with federal and provincial governments to coordinate refugee access to public health services, education, and housing resources. The city's existing infrastructure, combined with the efforts of non-profit organizations and private sponsors, created a comprehensive support system for the incoming refugees. Refugees were initially housed with sponsors or in temporary accommodations, with community and religious organizations assisting in securing affordable rentals.

Toronto's Vietnamese early arrivals had already started to form associations as early as 1972, and they played a crucial role in supporting newcomers during the migration waves, offering mutual aid, and preserving cultural practices. They helped new arrivals to maintain cultural traditions and celebrating events like the Vietnamese New Year. Buddhist temples and Christian churches provided spiritual support and community gathering spaces. By 1992, multiple Vietnamese Buddhist temples had been established in Toronto, serving as cultural and religious hubs for the community (Dorais 2000a).

As was the case in most communities across Canada, the standard Canadian diet was not acceptable for Vietnamese refugees and foods familiar in Vietnamese cuisine were not readily available in local grocery stores. It was in Chinatown that they could find some of the foods and herbal products which were essential for maintaining traditional diets and cultural practices.

Language proficiency helped to open doors to employment opportunities. Community centers, educational institutions, and religious organizations offered English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. While some refugees secured jobs in their trained professions, others entered different sectors, including manufacturing, services, and small businesses. Over time, Vietnamese-owned enterprises, such as restaurants and specialty stores, began to emerge, contributing to Toronto's diverse economic and social fabric.

Similar to the situations observed in Québec, social customs also presented a challenge in Toronto and community organizations offered orientation workshops about Canadian cultural and social customs. The harsh winters needed a significant adjustment for refugees arriving from tropical regions. Sponsors and community groups provided appropriate winter clothes and safety measures. Over time, refugees adapted to the seasonal changes, with many embracing winter activities and integrating them into their new Canadian lifestyles.

While Toronto's healthcare system provided necessary medical care, there were challenges in accessing culturally sensitive health services. Language barriers and cultural differences hindered communication between patients and healthcare providers. Community organizations and interpreters helped bridge these gaps (Adelman 1982).

In summary, *Operation Lifeline's* collaborative efforts, combined with the resilience of the Vietnamese refugees and the support of Toronto's existing Vietnamese community, facilitated a successful integration process. Through the City's housing assistance, community support, language training, and cultural adaptation, refugees were able to rebuild their lives in their new country (Dorais 2000a).

Vancouver

According to the 2021 Census, the Greater Vancouver area is home to a population of 34,915 individuals of Vietnamese origin. Beiser's research on the Vietnamese refugee experience in British Columbia offers insights into refugees who settled in Vancouver, including their experiences of racism as a barrier to labour market integration. There is the example of a British Columbian fisherman who lodged a complaint against licensed Vietnamese fishers in Vancouver, alleging that their aggressive fishing practices were depleting Vancouver Island's oyster population. Beiser attributed this to the narrowing of the job market and resources that followed the 1982 recession, which led to the scapegoating of Vietnamese newcomers (Beiser 1999).

He also offered reflections on the dilemmas that Vietnamese newcomers grappled with in refugee camps, recalling the story of a family who escaped from Vietnam. For example, a french-speaking Vietnamese refugee who had been initially selected for resettlement in Québec was warned by other refugees at the Malaysian refugee camp that the extremely cold climate in eastern Canada restricted people to their homes for half of the year. His brother who also lived at the Malaysian camp had watched orientation films that depicted Canadian winters as gloomy, lifeless,

and desolate. He therefore did not disclose his proficiency in French to avoid placement in Québec. Now in Vancouver, they are grateful believing the Western weather to be more comfortable and familiar than that of Montréal. The brothers' experience is one example of how Vietnamese refugees strategized and maneuvered throughout the immigration process in ways that would allow them to land in a setting with characteristics similar to Vietnam's (Beiser 1999).

The neighbouring cities of Vancouver and Richmond both have large Vietnamese populations. In 2013, the section of Kingsway Street between Fraser and Knight streets was designated Vancouver's Little Saigon, creating a commercial and community hub for the city's Vietnamese population (Thuncher 15 August 2013).

Vancouver also shares some similarities with the urban environments in the Greater Montréal and Toronto municipalities given that all cities are, historically, densely populated and relatively culturally diverse. Vancouver's population of Vietnamese origin is comparable in numbers to that of Montréal's 38,660. And the combined Vietnamese population of the three largest municipalities in 2021 is 155,800, representing a concentration of 57 percent of the overall Canadian population of Vietnamese origin (Statistics Canada 2024).

Victoria

The current population of Vietnamese origin in Victoria remains rather small and total numbers are not readily available. There are, however, a few studies about the resettlement experience of Vietnamese that create a compelling case for including Victoria as a sample city. Victoria is unique insofar as there are studies addressing some of the factors that might explain why it was not as successful as the documented experiences in other communities.

By 1983, Victoria had welcomed 405 Vietnamese people. The small population size of Vietnamese-Victorians made community organization efforts more challenging. In 1981, Vietnamese Victorians established an ethnic association that unfortunately ceased activities less than five years later. This left one small Buddhist and one small Catholic group as their only spaces to gather as a community at the time. (Stephenson 1995).

In her 1987 study, Woon underscored the complex dynamics between sponsorship models and refugee adaptation, highlighting that while private sponsorship expedited early economic integration, it also impeded cultural assimilation and long-term resilience. Privately sponsored refugees achieved financial independence more rapidly than their government-assisted

counterparts, and that advantage was attributed to the personal networks and resources provided by private sponsors. But despite these economic gains, only one-third of privately sponsored refugees felt adjusted to Canadian life after the first year, whereas a larger proportion of government-assisted refugees reported feeling adjusted. The close involvement of private sponsors sometimes led to a dependency that hindered greater social integration. She concluded that the initial advantages of private sponsorship may have diminished over time, especially during economic downturns. Government-assisted refugees on the other hands, having developed job-hunting skills and broader social networks, adapted more effectively in the long term (Woon 1987).

The refugees' approach for seeking help was compounded by their feelings of social isolation outside their own Vietnamese community in Victoria. Stephenson describes issues isn hospital settings where language interpretation and unfamiliarity with foods were two common issues. Fearful of being perceived as ungrateful for refusing unfamiliar and nauseating hospital food, many opted not to eat. This refusal could have led medical professionals to interpret these as symptoms of an illness as opposed to a lack of culturally appropriate food options. One food in particular that was often a staple in hospital diets, Jello, was singled out as especially culturally unacceptable and nauseating. It was considered at odds with Vietnamese cuisine is so many ways: Jello is cooked yet eaten cold; it is prepared using animal products yet is fruit-flavoured; and it takes on what for them was an unusual and unpleasant texture. But more importantly, Vietnamese conceptualizations of health render hot and cold an important binary in healing. When unwell, people believe they should refrain from eating cold foods. A cold, or influenza, for example, is understood as a cold state which can be alleviated with hot foods. As a result, Vietnamese people were more likely to seek herbal medicine in informal settings, and less likely to seek medical professionals unless emergencies compelled them to do so (Stephenson 1995, 1635).

V- CONCLUSION

Contributions of the Vietnamese Diaspora

From humble beginnings, the Vietnamese diaspora has had a profound influence in Canada by making Vietnamese culture an integral part of the history and the social fabric of Canada. From a handful of university students who came to Canada in the 1950s and a few religious groups escaping communist North Vietnam after the division of the country, the Vietnamese population

has grown to more than 275,000 people. According to the 2021 Census, the Vietnamese Canadian community is now one of the largest Asian diaspora groups in the country, with the majority of Vietnamese Canadians concentrated in Ontario (38 percent), British Columbia (31 percent), and Québec (15 percent) (Statistics Canada 2024).

The tipping point that marked the rapid growth in Vietnamese population in Canada was the mass exodus of refugees following the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Millions fled Vietnam by land and sea in search of safety in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. The journey was extremely dangerous, and the UNHCR estimates that between 200,000 to 400,000 men, women and children perished at sea as they attempted to escape (Cutts 2000). In response, countries such as the United States, France, Australia and Canada combined opened their doors to resettle those who reached temporary refugee camps across Southeast Asia.

The initial phase of resettlement in Canada was characterized by the arrival of large numbers of refugees in a short period of time, particularly in cities such as Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Many arrived with limited resources and faced numerous challenges as they adapted to unfamiliar foods, new social customs, employment barriers, and Canada's harsh winter climate. For those who settled in Québec, familiarity with the French language, often acquired through earlier education in Vietnam, helped ease this transition. Equally important, was the support of the small Vietnamese already established in Canada, whose members played an essential role in welcoming newcomers and helping them adapt to their new environment.

Economic and Educational Integration

In his study *The Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees across Canada over Three Decades,* Hou provides a comprehensive analysis of the educational and economic integration of Vietnamese refugees who arrived in Canada between 1979 and 1980. Drawing on data from the 1981, 1991, and 2001 censuses, as well as the 2011 National Household Survey, he examines the long-term progress of both adult and child refugees.

Although many adult Vietnamese refugees arrived with limited formal education, they placed a strong emphasis on education for themselves and their children. As a result, educational outcomes improved significantly across generations. Vietnamese refugees who arrived as children achieved remarkable educational success: by 2011, 36 percent had obtained university degrees,

surpassing both other childhood immigrants (32 percent) and the Canadian-born population (26 percent) (Hou 2017).

Despite the challenges they faced upon arrival, adult Vietnamese refugees also demonstrated high employment rates shortly after resettlement. Their strong work ethic contributed to their economic integration into Canadian society. Although they initially experienced an earnings gap compared with other immigrant groups, this gap gradually closed over time. Vietnamese refugees who arrived as children not only achieved higher educational levels but also experienced strong economic mobility, with adult earnings surpassing those of other childhood immigrants and many Canadian-born individuals.

Hou's research underscores the resilience and determination of Vietnamese refugees in Canada. Over three decades, many were able to overcome significant disadvantages and build stable and prosperous lives, with younger generations in particular achieving remarkable educational and economic success.

Social and cultural integration

Beginning in the late 1970s, Vietnamese associations and community centres across Canada played an essential role in supporting newcomers. These organizations provided settlement assistance, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and employment support, while community leaders worked closely with government agencies and non-profit organizations to ensure refugees had access to the resources they needed.

Religious institutions also became important pillars of community life. Catholic churches in Montréal and Vancouver served as key gathering places for many Vietnamese refugees, offering spiritual support and a sense of belonging. At the same time, Buddhist temples established in cities such as Montréal, Toronto, and Calgary became important centres for community gatherings, cultural preservation, and religious practice.

National organizations such as the Vietnamese Canadian Federation (VCF) and the Vietnamese Women's Association of Canada (VWAC) emerged to represent the interests of Vietnamese Canadians within the broader Canadian society. These organizations have played a central role in preserving Vietnamese language and culture through community events such as Tet (Lunar New Year) celebrations, cultural festivals, and artistic performances that introduce Vietnamese traditions to the wider Canadian public (Vietnamese Canadian Federation 2020).

The Continuing Impact of Vietnamese Community and Religious Associations

Over time, membership in community and religious associations has evolved. While many organizations were initially focused on supporting first-generation immigrants, they now serve a broader population that includes second- and third-generation Vietnamese Canadians. These associations continue to play a crucial role in maintaining cultural connections for younger generations born in Canada while responding to new community needs through youth mentorship, career development programs, and mental health support initiatives.

In this way, community organizations have become an important bridge between Vietnamese Canadians and the wider Canadian society, helping to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding.[6]

Multicultural values

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the Vietnamese diaspora has contributed to Canada's social and cultural landscape. Before the arrival of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1970s, most Canadians had little familiarity with the history or cultures of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Media coverage of the refugee crisis brought images of the Fall of Saigon and the plight of the "boat people" into Canadian homes, prompting an unprecedented public response.

The compassion demonstrated by thousands of Canadians who volunteered to sponsor refugees reflected a significant shift in the importance of multiculturalism in Canadian society. When the federal government introduced the Multiculturalism Policy in the House of Commons in 1971, it marked the first official multicultural policy in the world. Its objective was to affirm that all cultures had value and a place within Canadian society. In 1988, this commitment was formalized through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Brousseau and Dewing 2018).

As Molloy observes, the arrival of refugees in the 1970s from Vietnam, followed closely by those from Cambodia and Laos was the catalyst for a profound transformation, offering Canadians the opportunity to actively embody and advance Canada's emerging multicultural values:

[6] For more information: https://www.vietcanfederation.org/

"It is probably fair to say that before 1979, multiculturalism was a rather vague concept to most Canadians. However, for the tens of thousands of Canadians deciding to welcome these rather exotic strangers into their communities, their churches and synagogues, and ultimately their homes, multiculturalism ceased to be an idea and became a living reality. The Indochinese movement was the first very large non-European movement to Canada and contributed significantly to transforming Canada into a well-functioning, open multicultural society. [7] It is not surprising that today most Canadians are proud of this movement and regard their fellow Canadians of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian backgrounds as members of the larger Canadian family" (Molloy et al. 2017, 460).

Today, Canadians of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian origin are widely recognized as an integral part of the Canadian social fabric. As the Vietnamese Canadian community continues to evolve, its history remains a powerful example of resilience, adaptation, and the enduring contributions of refugee communities to Canadian society. And their legacy continues to shape a beautiful pattern in the patchwork quilt that represents the Canadian social fabric.

[7] Canada accepted 6,000 refugees from Uganda in 1972, and 7,000 refugees from Chile and other Latin America countries in the 1970s. The Indochinese movement was larger than either of these movements by a factor of ten.

REFERENCES

Adelman, H. 2021. "Operation Lifeline" in *Finding Refuge in Canada: Narratives of Dislocation* edited by George Melnyk and Christina Parker, 91-98. Athabasca: Athabasca University Press.

Adelman, H. 1980. *The Indochinese Refugee Movement: The Canadian Experience*. Proceedings of a conference in Toronto, 19–21 October 1979. Toronto: Operation Lifeline.

Beiser, M. 1999. *Strangers at the Gate: The 'Boat People's' First Ten Years in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Brousseau, L. and Dewing, M. 2018. *Canadian Multiculturalism*. Research Publications. Library of Parliament, Canada. Publication No 2009-20-E 15 Revised 3 January 2018. https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/200920E

Canada Employment and Immigration Canada.1978. Canada's Special Refugee Program for Indochinese Small-Boat Escapees-1978. Canadian Immigration Historical Society. Ottawa. https://cihs-shic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Canadas-Special-Refugee-Program-for-Indochinese-Small-Boat-Escapees-1978.pdf

Carrière, A. 2016. *History and Legacy of Refugee Resettlement in Ottawa: A Primer*. Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership. http://cciottawa.ca/wp-content/uploads/Myths-History-and-Stats.pdf

Casasola, M. 2016. The Indochinese Refugee Movement and the Subsequent Evolution of UNHCR and Canadian Resettlement Selection Policies and Practices. *Refuge*, 32(2), 41-53.

Chan, K.B. and L-J. Dorais. 1998. "Family, Identity, and the Vietnamese Diaspora: The Québec Experience", in *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* Vol. 13 No 2 October 1998. 285-308. https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40047125

Chan, K.B. and L.Lam, 1983. "Resettlement of Vietnamese-Chinese Refugees in Montreal, Canada: Some Socio-psychological Problems and Dilemmas" in *Canadian Ethnic Studie*s-Études Ethniques Au Canada Vol.15, no 1, 1-16.

Cutts, M. 2000. "The Flight From Indochina" in *The state of the world's refugees, 2000: Fifty years of humanitarian action*. Geneva: UNHCR, Oxford University Press, 79-104.

https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/3ebf9bb8e.pdf

Dorais, L-J. 1991. Refugee Adaptation and Community Structure: The Indochinese in Québec City, Canada. *International Migration Review*, xxv(3), 551-571.

Dorais, L-J. 2000. "Research on Vietnamese Immigration to Canada*"*, in *Moussons:Humanities Research on Southeast Asia* 1: 93-105. Published online 6 June 2020. Accessed 9 March 2025.URL: http://journals.openedition.org/moussons/8864;DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/moussons.8864

- 2000a. *The Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in Canada*. Canadian Historical Association. https://cha-shc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/5c374f28156ad.pdf

Dorais, L-J. 2007. Faith, Hope and Identity: Religion and The Vietnamese REFUGEES. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 26(2), 57-68.

Dorais, L-J. and E. Richard. 2007. *Les Vietnamiens de Montréal.* Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Employment and Immigration Canada. 1982. *Indochinese Refugees: The Canadian Response, 1979 and 1980.* Catalogue no. mp23-60/1982E- pdf. Ottawa: Employment and Immigration Canada. Ottawa. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/cic/MP23-60-1982-2-eng.pdf

Glassco, C. 2020. *Before the Sun Comes Up: The Making of Canadian Refugee Policy amidst the Refugee Crisis in Southeast Asia, 1975-1980*. Carleton University. Ottawa. Hearts of Freedom website: https://heartsoffreedom.org/research-papers-literature-reviews.

Hathaway, James C. 1993. "Labelling the 'Boat People': The Failure of the Human Rights Mandate of the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees" in *Human Rights Quarterly* 15 (4): 686–709.

Hou, F. 2017. *The Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees across Canada over Three Decades.* UNU-WIDER Working Paper 2017/188. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1724412

Kiernan, B. (2003). The demography of genocide in Southeast Asia: The death tolls in Cambodia, 1975-79, and East Timor, 1975-80. *Critical Asian Studies*, *35*(4), 585-597.

Kumin, J. 2008. Orderly Departure from Vietnam: Cold War Anomaly or Humanitarian Innovation? in *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 27, Issue 1, 2008, Pages 104–117. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdn009

Lâm,Vinh Dinh. 2017. *Price of Freedom: Exodus and Diaspora of Vietnamese People,* Translated by Lâm The Vinh, First Edition. South Orange County: Nguoi Viet Books.

Luttmer, Eileen. 1968. "Catholic Refugees from Vietnam in Canada." *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Report*, 1968. Government of Canada Archives: Vietnamese Refugees and Religious Communities (1950-1970).

McCallum, Martin. 2024. *Immigration: The Canada-Québec Accord* in Hill Studies, Library of Parliament, Canada. Publication No 2011-89-E. https://lop.parl.ca/staticfiles/PublicWebsite/Home/ResearchPublications/HillStudies/PDF/2011-89-E.pdf

Molloy, Michael J. 2014. "In Memoriam – Tove Bording." *cihs [Canadian Immigration Historical Society] Bulletin* 71 (October): 11. https://cihs-shic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Bulletin-71- Final.pdf#page11.

Molloy, M.J. and Simeon, J.C. 2016. The Indochinese Refugee Movement and the Launch of Canada's Private Sponsorship Program. *Refuge*, 32(2), 3-8.

Molloy, M., Duschinsky, P., Jenson, K., & Shalka R. 2017. *Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese Refugees*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Powell, James. "*Project 4000 27 June 1979"* in Ottawa Stories - Momentous Events in the City's Life. Ottawa. Ottawa Historical Society. https://www.historicalsocietyottawa.ca/publications/ottawa-stories/momentous-events-in-the-city-s-life/project-4000

Robinson, W. C. 1998. "Cumulative Indo-Chinese Resettlement Statistics, 1975–97," appendix 2 of *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*. Zed Books. New York.

Statistics Canada. 2024. Profile Table. Census Profile 2021. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

Stephenson, P. 1995. Vietnamese Refugees in Victoria, B.C.: An Overview of Immigrant and Refugee Healthcare in a Medium-Sized Canadian Urban Centre. *Social Science & Medicine*, 40(12), 1631-1642.

Thuncher, Jennifer. 15 August 2023. “Kensington-Cedar Cottage: Rebranding of Kingsway area to ‘Little Saigon’ attracting tourists” in Vancouver Courier (15 August 2013). https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/courier-archive/community/kensington-cedar-cottage-rebranding-of-kingsway-area-to-little-saigon-attracting-tourists-2959004. Retrieved 7 March 2025

United Nations General Assembly. Report of the Secretary General. 7 November 1979. Geneva. https://www.refworld.org/reference/themreport/unga/1979/en/91472

United Nations General Assembly. 1989. *International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees: Declaration and Comprehensive Plan of Action.* Note by the Secretary-General. UN Doc. A/CONF.148/2 (26 April 1989). Reproduced in *International Journal of Refugee Law* 5, no. 4 (1993): 617–624. https://academic.oup.com/ijrl/article-pdf/5/4/617/4418309/5-4-617.pdf

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 1989. *International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees: Background Statistical Documentation.* Document VII. “Departures from the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam for Countries of Resettlement.” Geneva.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 1989. *UNHCR Appeals to Governments on Resettlement of the Pre-Cutoff Caseload.* Press Release, Geneva, 15 June 1989. Issued during the International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees.

Vietnamese Canadian Federation. 2020. *About the Vietnamese Canadian Federation. https://www.vietcanfederation.org/*

Woon F. 1987. The mode of refugee sponsorship and the socio-economic adaptation of Vietnamese in Victoria: A three year perspective. In Dorais, L.J., Chan K.B., & Indra, D. (eds.) Ten years later: Indochinese communities in Canada. Montréal: Canadian Asian Studies Association: 132-146