

CHAU GIANG BUI

# Changing Lives and Identities

The Vietnamese Community  
in the United States  
and Germany

**WISSENSCHAFTLICHE BEITRÄGE  
AUS DEM TECTUM VERLAG**

Reihe Anglistik



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1. General background of the thesis

The thesis focuses on Vietnamese immigration to the United States and Germany, the socioeconomic and cultural adaptation of immigrants and refugees as well as the education of their children. Nowadays, there are approximately 1.7 million Vietnamese from diverse backgrounds in the US (US Census Bureau 2013) and over 83,000 in Germany (Das Statistik-Portal 2013), whose adaptation and acculturation into US and German society vary greatly. In order to understand the community, first of all, it is necessary to understand the immigrants' backgrounds and the reasons why they moved to these two countries.

In the almost 40 years since the Vietnam War ended, there have been several immigration waves of Vietnamese to the United States. Prior to "the fall of Saigon" in 1975, the number of Vietnamese people living or studying in the United States was not significant. There were approximately 18,000 Vietnamese in the US before 1975 including university students who arrived in the 1950s and war brides (Freeman, *Changing* 30). However, the end of the Vietnam War marked the beginning of massive immigration of Vietnamese to the USA. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people escaped from their homeland, often in small, untrustworthy boats, and arrived in America with little money and property. Unlike other Asian ethnic groups such as the Koreans, the Japanese or the Indians, who moved to America in order to obtain a better education or better jobs, the Vietnamese came to America as refugees. Most of them were unprepared for life in a different country, had a limited command of English and traumatic experiences of war.

After the first large wave of refugees at the end of the Vietnam War, there were many smaller subsequent waves and another large wave in 1978. Due to the great number of 'boat people' who died on the way, the Vietnamese government laid down a policy of allowing Vietnamese citizens to legally immigrate to other countries for reasons of permanent residence in accordance with specific programs or agreements. Programs such as the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), the Humanitarian Operation (HO), the Special Released Reeducation Center Detainee Resettlement Program and the Amerasian Homecoming Program opened the door for hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people to enter the United States.

Nowadays, Vietnamese immigration to the United States still continues. Due to the strong and substantive improvements in the bilateral relations since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USA and Vietnam in July 1995, Vietnamese people have had many opportunities to come to the US to study or work and then receive permission for residence. The number of Vietnamese living, working and studying in the USA has thus again increased rapidly in the last ten years.

Back at the time when the first Vietnamese boat people arrived in the USA, they had to cope with many difficulties in a new country with a radically different culture from their own. During their time in refugee camps, they lived on assistance from the US government, improved their English language proficiency step by step, and learned about American culture. Following their resettlement throughout the USA, Vietnamese people have established communities in many cities across America, from New York to California. These communities initially provided a network of contacts and later became the cradle of all cultural activities of Vietnamese people in the USA. Solidarity among the members of these communities has played an important role in supporting Vietnamese people spiritually and materially during their resettlement process. From being refugees with nothing but clothes on their bodies, within four decades many Vietnamese have become successful entrepreneurs, company founders and NASA astronauts. The educational success of Vietnamese children at American schools has been seen as a wonder, considering the fact that in many cases their parents were not highly educated. With nearly two million people, the Vietnamese community has grown to be one of the largest ethnic groups in the USA today after the Mexicans (34.5 million) (US Census Bureau 2013), the Chinese (3.5 million), the Indians (2.75 million) and the Filipinos (2.5 million) (US Census Bureau 2010). It therefore plays a significant role in the economic, social, cultural and political life of America. On the other hand, it also contributes to the social problems facing American society, as a number of Vietnamese youths of the second and following generations do not manage to enter mainstream society in America. Delinquency and other social problems such as drug abuse, alcohol abuse and the formation of youth gangs to commit crimes have given them a bad reputation. The number of Vietnamese adolescents with at least one instance of drug or alcohol abuse and conflict with the police increased drastically within one decade between the years 1990s and 2000s (Zhou and Bankston, "Delinquency" Table 6.1).

To some extent, the history of Vietnamese immigration to Germany is similar to that to the US. Until the reunification of North and South Vietnam in April 1975, only a few thousand Vietnamese lived in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). After 1975, the Vietnamese community in Germany consisted of two main different groups: the boat people who arrived in the FRG between 1975 and 1986 and the contract workers who were employed in the GDR as of about 1980. The boat people who came to Germany after the Vietnam War wanted to escape from the political persecution of the Communist regime in South Vietnam and the desperate economic situation, like those who came to the USA. After a long time in the refugee camps in neighboring Asian countries, they were transferred to third countries including Germany. After coming to the FRG, they were dispersed among the different federal states. Therefore, the community was not concentrated in a particular city. While the destination of the boat people was the FRG, the contract workers came to the GDR. The GDR wanted to recruit citizens from other communist nations to fill labor shortages and improve production in times of economic prosperity. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam began to send young people abroad as cheap labor in the 1980s to help their country pay its national debt and alleviate the massive unemployment in Vietnam (Wolf 6). For many young Vietnamese, it was a great financial opportunity to go to the GDR during that time of the serious economic crisis in their home country although there were no adequate preparations for the workers moving to the GDR, neither in Vietnam nor in the GDR.

When the first Vietnamese boat people and contract workers arrived in Germany, they met more or less the same challenges as those in the US. However, many of these people and their children have reaped economic and educational achievements which have been praised in German newspapers. Their children have also been mentioned as models for successful integration into German society despite their parents' limited language proficiency and adaptation difficulties.<sup>1</sup> In comparison to other ethnic groups such as the Turkish or the Arabs, the Vietnamese are generally considered much further integrated. Nevertheless, looking at the social structure of the Vietnamese community in Germany, a para-

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<sup>1</sup> German newspapers that have reported the success of Vietnamese children include: Spiegel Online (<http://www.spiegel.de/schulspiegel/wissen/schlaue-zuwanderer-ostdeutsche-vietnamesen-ueberfluegeln-ihre-mitschueler-a-582545.html>), Zeit.de (<http://www.zeit.de/2009/05/B-Vietnamesen>).

dox exists. On the one hand, Vietnamese immigrants have achieved a successful integration process. On the other hand, many Vietnamese immigrants in East Germany have been considered among the worst criminals, whereby they are ranked twelfth in the list of the most frequent non-German suspects (Beuchling, "Manchmal" 84-87).

Although the number of Vietnamese in Germany is not as high as in the USA and they are dispersed throughout Germany, community activities are still maintained strongly by Vietnamese social organizations such as the ViFi (*Vietnamesische Fraueninitiative in Deutschland*). This organization has been the bridge to help support cultural activities of the Vietnamese community in Germany and the collaboration between Vietnam and Germany. It has offered various seminars for different generations of Vietnamese to enrich their spiritual life and improve the understanding of their identities.

Nowadays, Vietnamese immigration to Germany has not stopped. Due to the improved bilateral relations between the two countries, a great number of German companies and organizations have established offices in Vietnam, which has been the motivation and encouragement for many Vietnamese to go to Germany to work for a short or long period of time. In addition, the low tuition fees of universities in Germany have made it one of the favorite destinations for Vietnamese students.

Questions have been raised about the success of the Vietnamese and their acculturation in the US and Germany. How were Vietnamese people with refugee backgrounds able to become so successful? How have Vietnamese children achieved excellent grades although their parents cannot speak the local language correctly? How do Vietnamese educate their children? How far are Vietnamese integrated into American and German society? Are there similarities / differences in the adaptation of Vietnamese in Germany and in the US?

## **2. Current research situation**

Despite the fact that the Vietnamese community in the United States has become the largest Vietnamese community abroad, making up about 50 percent of the overseas Vietnamese population<sup>2</sup> and forming an important ethnic group in the USA, the studies of this community pub-

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<sup>2</sup> Information retrieved from the Embassy of Vietnam in Washington DC in January 2014.



lished in Vietnam to date are still limited. There have been publications with a primary focus on the economic, cultural, political life and future prospects of the overseas Vietnamese community in general.<sup>3</sup> However, few articles have been written about the Vietnamese community in the USA in particular. There have been publications making suggestions for helping Vietnamese overseas maintain the Vietnamese language and traditions, as well as making the Vietnamese law more attractive to support elites to return and contribute to the processes of industrialization and modernization in Vietnam today.<sup>4</sup> Since the research subject of the publications mentioned above is the entire Vietnamese community abroad, these documents have not targeted the specific features of the Vietnamese community in the USA, still less their acculturation process into American society.

In comparison with the documentation on the overseas Vietnamese community published domestically in Vietnam, there have been many more foreign monographs and articles, written mostly by Vietnamese-American or American authors, about the Vietnamese community and their lives in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Many works describe the immigration history of the Vietnamese and their success in American society today. Some works depict the Vietnamese community along with other groups of immigrants, particularly those from Asia such as the Chinese, the

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<sup>3</sup> Well-written documents about overseas Vietnamese by Vietnamese authors with translated titles include: “Vietnamese People Abroad” by Trong Dang Dan Tran, “A New Way of Looking at Overseas Vietnamese” by Trong Thuc Tran and “About Vietnamese People Living Abroad” by Ngoc Ha Nguyen. All these works describe the lives and achievements of overseas Vietnamese in general. They also mention the differences between generations. However, none of these writes about the lives and acculturation of Vietnamese-Americans in particular.

<sup>4</sup> The articles with translated titles include: “Teaching Vietnamese to Preserve Vietnamese Culture and History” (<http://quehuongonline.vn/VietNam/Home/Nguoi-Viet-o-nuoc-ngoai/Doi-song/2015/01/59781F69/>) and “Ho Chi Minh City: Strengthening the Interest of Vietnamese Overseas” (<http://quehuongonline.vn/VietNam/Home/Nguoi-Viet-o-nuoc-ngoai/Tin-cong-dong/2015/01/59781F53/>). Both were published in the *Online Homeland Journal*.

<sup>5</sup> Most literature used in the thesis about the Vietnamese-American community was written by Vietnamese-American or American authors. Examples include: *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* by Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work and Cultural Values* by Caplan, Whitmore and Choy, *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Americans and Their Mothers* by DeBonis and *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975–1995* by James Freeman.

Japanese, the Laotians, the Cambodians or the Filipinos.<sup>6</sup> However, these ethnic communities have very different cultures, languages and traditional values, which is why it is problematic to include them in the same category. Several other works study the process of growing up of Vietnamese youths in the USA and the reasons for some of them to go astray.<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to understand the key to the rapid integration and success of the Vietnamese community in America, monographs have been written in which the cultural background of the Vietnamese people is outlined and explained.<sup>8</sup> These explanations of traditional Vietnamese values not only deepen the understanding of the adaptation process, the educational success and the solidarity within the Vietnamese community, but also make it possible to answer questions regarding the reaction of the Vietnamese community to things that do not fit into their tradition, or what it means to them to be Vietnamese-Americans.

The wide range of available research articles, narratives and statistical data of the Vietnamese community in the US provides a sufficient source for the thesis. There are essay collections in which stories are told by Vietnamese people about their hard journeys to America, their experiences of their first days in the USA, and their thoughts and feelings during the resettlement process in the United States. *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives* by James M. Freeman and *The Vietnamese Experience in America* by Paul James Rutledge are examples of significant books in which a great number of narratives and interviews can be found. Furthermore, articles and monographs by Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American and American authors are of the most important sources of information about Vietnamese in America.

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include: *The Asian American Educational Experience: A Source Book for Teachers and Students* by Don T. Nakanishi and Tina Yamano Nishida, *Research on the Education of Asian and Pacific Americans* by Clara Park, A. Lin Goodwin and Stacey Lee and *Asian and Pacific American Education: Learning, Socialization, and Identity* by Clara Park, Russell Endo and A. Lin Goodwin.

<sup>7</sup> These works include: *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* and "Delinquency and Acculturation in the Twenty-first Century: A Decade's Change in a Vietnamese American Community" by Min Zhou and Carl Bankston.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of monographs in which Vietnamese traditional values are explained include: *A Study of Personal and Cultural Values: American, Japanese, Vietnamese* by Roy D'Andrade, *The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work and Cultural Values* by Caplan, Whitmore and Choy and *Identity Formation of Vietnamese Immigrant Youth in an American High School* by Craig Centre.

Besides many books, research papers and essay collections, Vietnamese-American literature also plays a role in helping to learn about the life of Vietnamese from diverse backgrounds in different situations in America. However, a great number of these works are written in Vietnamese. On the one hand, Vietnamese authors who were not born and grew up in the US can presumably express themselves better in their mother tongue. On the other hand, these works respond to the emotional needs of many Vietnamese who wish to relieve their nostalgia by seeking images familiar from their past in the process of reading. Tran Dieu Hang is a well-known author who writes about the problems and difficulties of Vietnamese female immigrants during their integration process in the US. Unlike Tran Dieu Hang, Andrew Lam writes about the Vietnamese-American identity and the hybridization of Eastern and Western cultures in his works. Several works<sup>9</sup> of these two authors will be analyzed in order to examine Vietnamese-American life through the lens of literature.

In comparison to the large number of research articles on the Vietnamese community in the US, there have neither been many books nor papers written on the Vietnamese community in Germany. The majority of books found domestically describe the history of Vietnamese immigration to Germany. Since the Vietnamese community in Germany is not one of the largest communities abroad, only limited research into their life has been made. In contrast, the current research situation in Germany is somewhat better since integration is one of the most frequent topics in social and political discussions. However, most articles on the Vietnamese community only provide a very general understanding of different groups of Vietnamese in West and East Germany. Many mainly describe the educational success of Vietnamese children at German schools despite their parents' lack of education and try to find an explanation for this phenomenon. Documents provided by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GTZ) on Vietnamese immigration and integration are the best and most reliable sources which can be found. In order to compensate for the scarce information on the acculturation of the different generations of Vietnamese living in Germany, the author of the thesis has conducted interviews with Vietnamese in Germany to find out more about the backgrounds of Vietnamese immigrant families and the

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<sup>9</sup> Works written by these two authors include: "Invisible woman" and "Darkness, Strange Land" by Tran Dieu Hang and the collection of essays *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres* by Andrew Lam.

acculturation of different generations. The results of this qualitative empirical research will also allow a better comparison with the situation in the USA.

In addition to the sources of information mentioned above, a number of reports as well as statistical data from departments such as the US Census Bureau, the Vietnamese Embassies in the US and in Germany, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam (MoFA) and the Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs<sup>10</sup> have served as important sources of information about Vietnamese in both countries.

### 3. Methodology

The Vietnamese community comprises two groups: the first and largest one is the *Viet Kieu*: Americans or Germans of Vietnamese descent, and the Vietnamese who have permanent residency and have been living in the USA / Germany for a long time. The second group consists of Vietnamese who have recently arrived in America / Germany for any purpose such as studying or working. The thesis will focus on the first group of the Vietnamese community. Based on the available sources, it will compare the results of several studies at various points in time, and analyze and evaluate the adaptation and acculturation of Vietnamese in America and Germany.

In order to make the research complete, interviews were conducted with Vietnamese living in the United States and in Germany. Due to the limited amount of relevant research currently available on the situation in Germany, these interviews will serve as main sources for the evaluation of Vietnamese acculturation in Germany. Despite the fact that the research situation in the US is significantly better than in Germany, the interviews conducted with Vietnamese-Americans will still provide additional information about the current development of acculturation trends among Vietnamese in the US. Therefore, the results of these interviews will be compared to the information taken from existing research to compare the life and acculturation of Vietnamese in different stages of time.

In addition, beyond the above-mentioned sources and interviews, the personal experience and knowledge of Vietnamese culture and people of the author of the thesis also serve as sources of information. Since

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<sup>12</sup> The Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs is an organ of the MoFA.

the author was born, grew up and lived in Vietnam, she understands Vietnamese culture and the mentality of Vietnamese people profoundly. Having arrived in Germany at the age of 18 and having spent ten years in Europe, she has had opportunities to learn about Western culture in general and German culture in particular. In the context of her studies and residence in Germany, she has gained a deep understanding of the differences between Vietnamese and Western culture.

#### **4. Goals and structure of the thesis**

The thesis has three main goals: first, to provide an account of the formation, development and important characteristics of the Vietnamese community in the United States and Germany; second, to study and analyze their socioeconomic and -cultural adaptation process since 1975; and third, to compare the Vietnamese community in both countries. With regard to Vietnamese people in the USA and Germany living under hugely different conditions in comparison to their lives in Vietnam, the following topics will be discussed: which important factors contributed to the resettlement of Vietnamese people throughout the United States / Germany? How have Vietnamese people responded to the challenges they have met during the adaptation process in their new country? How deep is their integration? Are there differences between generations? What makes people Vietnamese-Americans or Vietnamese-Germans?

In order to achieve the three goals mentioned above, the main body of the thesis will be divided into four large chapters. In the second chapter after the introduction, the historical and social background of the emigration of Vietnamese people to the United States and Germany will be depicted chronologically. Before the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, there were only very few Vietnamese in America and Germany. However, in the context of the fall of Saigon, a number of waves of migrants fleeing Vietnam began, which still continue today. The path Vietnamese people took to reach the countries of asylum, their lives in refugee camps, the sponsoring programs of the government and their resettlement throughout the USA / Germany will be analyzed in this part of the thesis.

The third chapter of the thesis will then examine the changing lives and identities of different Vietnamese generations in the United States. After having spent a period of time in the refugee camps, Vietnamese people were resettled and assisted in obtaining jobs. Many in the US began to relocate to different locations across the nation, from the East-

ern coast of Virginia to the Western coast of California. Due to this secondary migration, many Vietnamese communities were established in various cities in the USA where a high number of Vietnamese people were living and working. Despite language barriers, the Vietnamese in America obtained considerable economic and scholastic achievements. Behind their financial achievements were many changes within the Vietnamese family, in particular changes in gender roles and the acquisition of more equality for women in relation to men. Vietnamese men from high social and occupational backgrounds in Vietnam experienced downward mobility, while Vietnamese women gained more opportunities to work and study. In addition to this change in gender roles, the traditional Vietnamese family also faced new challenges such as generation gaps and the loss of cultural heritage. Generation conflicts are inevitable, as young Vietnamese people who were born and grew up in America have different views and attitudes toward life from the generations of their grandparents and parents. Cultural differences have led to contradictions and clashes between Vietnamese family members. Freedom for children in America has become a 'double-edged sword', which on the one hand has allowed Vietnamese children to make their own decisions and avoid too much parental involvement, but on the other hand has facilitated a lack of parental control which has sometimes led to maladaptation and delinquency. What exactly are these cultural differences? How do the Vietnamese in America react to these challenges? What are the changes within the Vietnamese family? This part of the thesis will study and analyze all these issues. A small survey based on data elicited by the author will supplement the overview of contemporary acculturative trends within the Vietnamese community in America. The analysis of several short stories and essays by Vietnamese-American authors about the Vietnamese in America, many of which bear autobiographical features, was chosen to add yet another perspective to the analysis of the Vietnamese-American community in this chapter.

Chapter four will study the acculturation of first- and second-generation Vietnamese immigrants in Germany mainly on the basis of data elicited by the author. When the boat people came to Germany, they had difficulty understanding the German language and culture. They were assisted in resettling and finding jobs similar to those in the US. Unlike the boat people, the contract workers experienced hardship after the Berlin Wall fell. They struggled to survive without any assistance from the German government. They were not familiar with Western

culture and were not proficient in German. However, their children speak German as their mother tongue and endeavor to be successful. They want to make their own decisions on what they will become and what they do in their career, while many parents still think that the only way to reach upward mobility is through education. It is inevitable that younger generations have different views and attitudes toward life than their grandparents and parents. Like the older Vietnamese in the US, those in Germany also prefer to maintain their traditional values, while younger Vietnamese want to fit in with their German friends. Besides the former boat people and contract workers, the author also interviewed Vietnamese in Germany of different immigration backgrounds in order to gain a more complex understanding of the entire community. How attached are first-generation Vietnamese in Germany still to their native culture? How much are Vietnamese youths interested in Vietnamese culture? How well do they speak German and Vietnamese? Do they define themselves as German or Vietnamese? This part will help understand the Vietnamese in Germany and their way of thinking.

After the study of the changing lives and identities of Vietnamese, the fifth chapter of the thesis will provide a comparison of the Vietnamese community in the US and in Germany. The following topics will be addressed in the comparison: socioeconomic status, reception on the part of the local people, patterns of acculturation, the preservation of Vietnamese culture and self-identification of different generations.

At the end of the thesis, the conclusion will offer a general evaluation of the life and the acculturation of Vietnamese people in the United States and Germany. In the coming decades the first Vietnamese generation leaving Vietnam after the War will become older and pass away. The second and later generations will thus come to represent the Vietnamese community in America / Germany. This will include those who were born and grew up in America and Germany as well as the intellectual elite who are studying and working in these two countries. Will they be as successful as the generation of their grandparents and parents? Will Vietnamese culture and traditional values be maintained and transmitted, or will second- and later-generation Vietnamese become pure Americans / Germans of Vietnamese descent? In the light of these issues, a prediction of the future of the Vietnamese community in the USA / Germany will be made.

## Chapter 2: Vietnamese immigration to the United States and Germany

### Section 1: Vietnamese immigration to the United States

#### 1. Historical background

To be able to carry out research into Vietnamese refugees and their current status in the United States, an understanding of the history of the Vietnamese nation, its people and the historical context of the waves of immigration is required. The name “Vietnam” presumably still reminds many people of the Vietnam War – a war which not only made Americans pay an expensive price, but also caused deep wounds in generations of American and Vietnamese people. It is a name that is deeply embedded in the American psyche, as the “Vietnam syndrome” lingered on for years with resentments, sorrow and pain for the American people (Duong 221). It is a central reference point in ideas about the past and popular culture in America. Hundreds of movies, books and stories have emerged about the Vietnam War and the American experience in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the mass demonstrations and anti-war activities of protestors, the United States intervened deeply in Vietnam’s war. However, on January 28, 1973 in Paris, the US government and the governments of South and North Vietnam consented to sign the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam. The intention of this agreement was to establish peace in Vietnam as well as ending the Vietnam Conflict and the US military involvement after years and millions of dollars spent by the US government financing the Vietnam War. According to the agreement, the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam had to be respected.<sup>12</sup> It also called for prisoners of war to be exchanged, and declared an in-place ceasefire. In the context of the agreement, no further military involvement and intervention of the USA in the internal affairs of South Vietnam were allowed (Do 25). As a result,

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<sup>11</sup> Popular movies about the Vietnam War include *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987). Books about this war include *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 with Poster* (2001) by George C. Herring, *Paradise of the Blind: A Novel* (1988) by Duong Thu Huong and *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* (1996) by Bao Ninh.

<sup>12</sup> The agreement required the United States to stop all its military activities against the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by ground, air, and naval forces wherever they may be based, and to end the mining of the territorial waters, ports, harbors, and waterways of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Do 25).



the agreement received enthusiastic approval from the North Vietnamese.

However, the withdrawal of US military and economic support soon meant rapid deterioration of the military situation for the government of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese military offensive of mid-March 1975 resulted in defeats in all cities in the Vietnamese highlands, such as Pleiku, Kontum and Ban Me Thuot (Addington 155-156). These events made the approximately 6,000 Americans who had remained in Vietnam, as well as the tens of thousands of Vietnamese who had fought in the South Vietnamese armed forces or had worked against the North fear for their lives once the North Vietnamese army had established control over the South (cf. Jespersen 460). The United States refugee office within the State Department was already preparing for the evacuation of American citizens and asked neighboring countries to allow refugees to enter their countries. Nevertheless, the flight of the refugees happened so rapidly that no one could foresee it or be well prepared. In a state of panic, one million refugees began their journey within the country, heading for Saigon and the coast. Several coastal cities of Vietnam such as Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh were evacuated in the last days of March 1975 (Dawson 156-159). The enormous number of Vietnamese people who wanted to be evacuated had an important impact on the vague plan of the US government. The initial intention was to evacuate from Saigon only US citizens and a select number of Vietnamese who had actually been working for the US government. Soon after this plan had been outlined, the number of Vietnamese people in the evacuation plan increased to 200,000 due to a conversation between Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and US Air Force General George S. Brown (US Department of State, "Document 236"). The discussions about the destinations of these refugees raised the question of whether they should be transferred to neighboring Asian countries or taken to the USA, and how. During the time of the debate, many Vietnamese people already fled Vietnam. Some of them, who were supported by friends within the US armed forces, were taken by helicopters, boats and ferries to US ships (Rutledge 3).

In the context of the further deterioration of economic, political and military conditions, the President of South Vietnam, Duong Van Minh, was forced to surrender to the North Vietnamese Communist government at the end of April 1975. Saigon came under the control of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). In the final hours of the

month, a sea of fleeing refugees surged around the walls of the US Embassy in Saigon. Thousands of people were in a state of panic and tried desperately to find a way to escape in the hope that the Americans would help them (Joes 145). In spite of the plan to evacuate a much greater number of Vietnamese from Saigon, as well as safe havens promised to certain Vietnamese people, the Americans disappointed them in the end. They began a belated emergency airlift to evacuate their military and diplomatic personnel along with some Vietnamese who were members of the South Vietnamese army and government, as well as those who had worked for the Americans. A total of 4,100 fortunate Vietnamese were taken along with 900 Americans as their helicopters took off from the roof of the US Embassy in Saigon before landing on American ships to prevent them from falling into the hands of the North Vietnamese (Schulzinger 327).

There were several reasons for the lack of preparation concerning the evacuation plans of the Americans and the massive exodus of Vietnamese people from their homeland at the end of and after the war. The rapid military collapse of South Vietnam was a surprise for everyone involved, including the North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese and American governments. It was not the military defeat itself that was unexpected but its timing and the speed with which it came. Many officials in the American government had believed that the Saigon government could hold out for some time and would survive (Kelly 12). Due to the speed of South Vietnam's disintegration, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled their homeland in a state of panic during the last three weeks of the war without thinking of the consequences of leaving Vietnam, or of what their lives in a foreign country would be like (13).

Another reason why so many Vietnamese people left their homeland was the rumor of a bloodbath if the PRG came to power. Despite the fact that this rumor was false, American embassy officials helped to spread it (Tran et al. 14). Along with other rumors sweeping Vietnam, many people believed erroneous information and sought a way to leave the country. A 41-year-old Vietnamese high school teacher of English from Saigon explains her reasons for coming to the US as follows:

I would not leave the country and my mother if they did not tell me the dirty stories about the communists. They said that they are going to give each single girl a huge sack containing a sick or handicapped communist soldier to take care of him, and to marry him, or if men soldiers "need", the single girls have to give. The children born will

belong to the government. I rather die than doing these things.  
(Kelly 17)

These kinds of rumors were made to seem so believable that a huge number of people left Vietnam in fear of something that never materialized. Many who left as refugees hoped that their move was only temporary and that they would be able to return home once the conflict was over.

In addition, the difficult economic and social situation in Vietnam after the Vietnam War caused many people to crave going abroad. The Vietnamese government had to cope with the extremely severe consequences of the war in combination with a bloody border war with China, as well as the military occupation of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The economic situation in Vietnam deteriorated rapidly due to the economic and trade embargo which the United States had been imposing on Vietnam since 1964. Other Southeast Asian and Western countries followed the American policy of isolating Vietnam. Political rivals outside Vietnam strongly opposed the Vietnamese government's policies, especially in the light of the issues concerning Cambodia at that time. Besides, the shortcomings of the new economic model and mistakes in managing the economy brought Vietnam into a ten-year socioeconomic crisis lasting from 1975 to 1985. Furthermore, ongoing natural disasters in Vietnam contributed to the reasons for the non-stop emigration waves of Vietnamese people after the end of the Vietnam War. More and more desperate Vietnamese tried to leave the country illegally without actually knowing what the future would bring. They could only hope that their lives in a new place would be better than the one they were leaving behind in Vietnam.

## **2. Different Vietnamese immigration waves**

Before the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, only a small number of Vietnamese people had immigrated to the United States. In the 1950s, there were a little over 300 Vietnamese in the USA; most of them were university students. In the 1960s, the number of Vietnamese immigrants increased to just over 4,000, including some war brides resulting from the American involvement in the Vietnam War (US Dept. of Homeland Security Table 2). Between 1970 and 1974, the number jumped once again to more than 14,500. In total, however, there were still only just over 18,000 Vietnamese in the USA before 1975 (Phan 159). The number of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States skyrocketed after the fall of