Refugees from Vietnam began resettling in the Triad in the late 1970s, fleeing the aftermath of the war in Vietnam. Most of the first refugees had worked closely with the U.S. government in Vietnam. Many were Roman Catholic and well educated, reflecting the political profile of the last government of South Vietnam. By the late 1970s the profile of the Vietnamese refugee was much more diverse, as is reflected by the compelling stories of the Vietnamese boat people. Over a million Vietnamese refugees were resettled in the United States in the latter part of the 20th century, and this became the largest single group of refugees to be resettled during that period. Vietnamese refugees and their stories were instrumental in passing the Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980 and in shaping U.S. refugee policies for years to come.

An estimated 5,000 Vietnamese refugees and their families now live in the Triad. However, it is quite difficult to estimate this number because of the mobility and diversity of this population. In addition, we are now moving into the third generation, and many distinguishing cultural characteristics have been lost. Some people from Vietnam still come to the United States, but at this time, with the exception of the Montagnards (see separate profile) they no longer arrive with refugee status.

DID YOU KNOW?

• Over a million Vietnamese refugees were resettled in the United States in the latter part of the Twentieth Century.
• More than 100,000 immigrants from Vietnam were “Amerasians,” children born in Vietnam to Vietnamese women and American fathers during the war years.
• The Vietnamese comprise the largest population of Southeast Asian refugees that have settled in the United States.
• According to the 2000 Census, the largest number of Vietnamese, more than 480,000, now live in Southern California. The Census also reported that more than 17,000 Vietnamese were living in North Carolina.

Information included here is provided to help you become more aware of the culture and traditions of your clients, students and co-workers. Please use this only as a guide, keeping in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your clients and their families about their specific beliefs, practices and customs. Showing respect and openness toward their traditions will help you build better relationships and provide more effective services.
CULTURE

LANGUAGE & EDUCATION
The Vietnamese language is shared by most people from Vietnam except for isolated minorities such as Montagnards. Dialects vary between north and south, and also between rural and urban areas. Education is highly valued and those who can are eager to pursue higher education.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES & BELIEFS
Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism that is heavily influenced by Chinese tradition, is the prevalent religion of the country. The Buddhism of the Khmer is different, part of the Theravada tradition connected to India. Roman Catholicism, while a minority religion, has also been influential because of the history of colonialism by the French and the political structures that grew out of that. Another popular religion is Cao Dai, prevalent primarily in regions of South Vietnam. While religion in Vietnam is subdued, the gentleness of Buddhism influences many Vietnamese customs.

In the Triad, there are active Buddhist temples in Greensboro and High Point and a Cao Dai community in Burlington. There are also active evangelical protestant churches, as well as a Catholic congregation. Some Vietnamese who are active in faith communities have affiliated with mainstream congregations.

FESTIVALS & HOLIDAYS
The Lunar New Year is the Vietnamese tradition, know as Tet Nguyen Dan. It occurs at the beginning of the year between January and February, and it is usually treated as a community celebration regardless of religious affiliation or faith commitment. Also, Tet Moon, usually celebrated around September, is of special significance in reminding children to be honest and obedient.

SOCIAL CLASS
Vietnam is a diverse country of almost 100 million people, located on international trade routes and active in international affairs since before the Vietnam War. Entrepreneurship is often associated with the Vietnamese, both in Vietnam and in the United States. Vietnamese people include highly-educated people, business people, and farmers. Poverty has remained a serious issue since the Vietnam War. The culture is strongly influenced by China and ethnic Chinese who maintain their own cultural traditions and language are an important minority, especially in urban areas. There are historical, economic, and cultural differences between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. A region of the rich Mekong delta bottom of Vietnam was once part of Cambodia, and many of the people there are ethnic Cambodians and speak Khmer. Other ethnic minorities are also present in the country, including the Cham, a Muslim population. The tribal peoples of the Southern Highlands, the Montagnards, maintain a separate identity and are profiled elsewhere in this handbook.

EMPLOYMENT
Though factory work was the standard placement for most refugees when they first arrived, many Vietnamese have since moved into mainstream occupations, including technology and education. Vietnamese businesses are prevalent in the Triad and across the country. These include restaurants, grocery stores, video stores, travel agencies,
hair and manicure salons, and gift shops. These businesses cater to both Vietnamese and mainstream patrons.

**FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS**

Family is the primary social institution and great respect is paid to the elders in a family. Families often live in multigenerational and extended family units, with the eldest male serving as head of household. In the United States many women are seen in leadership positions, both in the home and in business.

**GESTURES & CUSTOMS**

Handshaking is acceptable, although older persons are more oriented toward bowing the head. Communication patterns are often subtle and repetitive. Respect is a primary value and disagreements are seldom directly expressed. Courtesy is important and smiling is common. Laughing is not necessarily an indication of humor, but can also be a reflection of disharmony or conflict. Pointing and gesturing for people to move in certain directions are both considered rude. It is very important to the Vietnamese people not to be publicly corrected or chastised, to “Lose Face.”

**HEALTH & WELLNESS**

**HEALTH BELIEFS**

Traditional Vietnamese medicine is based on the premise of air, fire, water, earth, and metal, with associated characteristics of cold, hot, wet, and dry. Elements must be kept in balance similar to Chinese traditions of yin/yang and hot/cold.

- A sweet rice porridge is often given to ill people.
- Dermabrasion, based on the properties of hot and cold, is often used to treat coughs and other illnesses.
- Heat transmitted by “cupping” (heating air in a cup with a flame, then placing the cup directly on the skin) is used as a treatment for fever reduction and balance, and may leave marks on the skin.

**MENTAL HEALTH**

People with mental illness are generally left alone.

**ALCOHOL USE**

The use of both alcohol and tobacco are accepted and these are generally offered to welcome guests in one’s home.

**OBSTACLES TO ACCESSING CARE**

A lack of understanding about medical terms and insufficient funds for medical treatment are the two leading factors which prevent Vietnamese people from seeking health care.

**SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

Substance abuse is seen as an individual problem.

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

There is not much focus on exercise.

**NUTRITION**

The Vietnamese are very concerned with nutrition and a large part of their diet consists of meat, fish, vegetables and rice.