

A Study of Library Services to the Vietnamese Population in California

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Abstract

The Vietnamese population in California increased dramatically after the fall of Saigon in 1975, when the first of three major waves of refugees relocated to the United States, settling mainly in California, Texas and Hawaii. On the whole, the Asian population in the United States is growing and services to this population must keep pace with the population growth. Libraries must continuously monitor their constituents to ensure that they are being adequately served. In order to do this, libraries must be closely involved in their communities and should mirror the ethnic diversity of the populations they serve.

Historically, academic libraries were the first to serve Asian patrons with collections and services, but with the increases in Asian immigration, public libraries are developing programs to serve their communities.

The key components for successful library services are communication, cultural awareness, community involvement and funding.

Libraries must use a variety of methods to continuously monitor their patrons to ensure that their collections and services remain relevant to the communities they serve.

Demographic, socioeconomic and ethnolinguistic profile

Demographic

I selected the Vietnamese population in California as my target group. In particular, I wanted to focus on the population in San Francisco Bay Area. According to U. S. Census data, the total U.S. population of Vietnamese is 1,223,736, making it by far

the largest group within the Southeast Asian category which includes Cambodian (206,052), Hmong (186,310) and Laotian (198,203). The largest concentration of Vietnamese is in California which reported 484,023 in Census 2000. The remaining Vietnamese are scattered across all the states, with significant populations in Texas (143,352), Washington (50,697) and Virginia (40,500). Alameda County reported 23,817 Vietnamese, with Oakland reporting 8,657 and Berkeley reporting 868. The median age of the total U.S. Vietnamese population is 29.9 years.

There were three main waves of Vietnamese refugee influx to the U.S. The first wave occurred in 1975, following the fall of South Vietnam, when 125,000 refugees were admitted. The second wave occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s with the so-called boat people who generally came from the countryside or fishing villages, and were less well educated than first wave. Over 150,000 refugees were admitted in 1980 and 1981. The third wave came in 1990 as a result of an agreement between US and the Vietnamese government. This agreement is referred to as “H.O.” which is often translated as “humanitarian operation” although it is actually the Vietnamese government’s code name given to the formerly imprisoned South Vietnamese ex-servicemen who comprised this group of refugees. Under this program, servicemen who had been imprisoned for more than three years were allowed to emigrate with their families including children under the age of 21.

The three groups experienced various levels of difficulty in adjusting to their new surroundings. The first group was inextricably identified with the U.S. failure in Vietnam, coming as a result of the fall of South Vietnam, and the refugees were met with certain resentment on their arrival. The second group benefited by the experiences of the

first group and had a relatively easy time settling in. Adjustment among the last group is said to have been more difficult- many were formerly high ranking military personnel, and overall the group had fewer job skills, and “psychological problems appear to be high in this last group” according to a report compiled by Nguyen and Dao (1998).

Socioeconomic

Vietnamese personal values are based on Confucian ideals of innate goodness and self-improvement, and emphasize family and community. Buddhism is the predominant religion, and ancestral worship is a key component. This cultural value is seen to be contributing to the growing gulf between old and new generations (Nguyen & Dao, 1998).

Education levels are lower than overall U.S. statistics which in turn are lower than overall levels for the entire Asian American population:. Among the Vietnamese, 61.9% are high school graduate or higher, 42.9% some college or higher and 19.5% Bachelor’s degree or higher as compared with the total U.S. population of 80.4%, 51.8% and 24.4%, respectively.

A high percentage (45%) of Vietnamese households are “linguistically isolated” (a household in which all members 14 and over have at least “some difficulty with English”), making them the most isolated group of Southeast Asians (24.7 % Asian overall, with the next highest being Hmong with 35.1%).

Per capita and median income in 1999 for all U.S. Vietnamese was lower than Asians overall, as well as the U.S. overall and census statistics report 16% of Vietnamese nationwide are living below Federal poverty level. Occupationally, Vietnamese reported 27% management/professional (a higher percentage than Laotian, Cambodians or

Hmong, but lower than Asian overall), 28.1% production, transportation and material moving, 19.4% service occupations, 19.1% sales and office occupations, 5.9% construction, .5% farming, fishing or forestry.

The overwhelming majority of Vietnamese (97.6%) live in urban areas, and more than half live in owner-occupied dwellings in 4-person families.

Ethnolinguistic

In an illuminating remark, Wong et al. (1998) note, “Chinese is to Asian languages what Latin is to the Romance languages.” In fact, Chinese was the original written language of Vietnam. The current Romanized Vietnamese language was developed by a Catholic priest in the 17th century and was adopted as the official language in 1920. The Vietnamese language has 27 consonants and 12 vowels and is monosyllabic and tonal. (Wong et al., 1998)

In describing the manners and customs of the Vietnamese, Nguyen and Dao (1998) note that they are shy, and tend to keep their true feelings hidden. They believe that directness shows lack of tact, prefer to have acquaintances introduce them rather than introducing themselves. The authors note that smiles can mean many different things, that they avoid eye contact, take pride in their children’s academic achievements, and keep family issues private to avoid losing face in the community. In general, they are hospitable, and prefer to live in close communities. Many still oppose the Vietnamese government and object to improving relations between U.S. and Vietnam.

History of LIS services

Academic Libraries

Academic libraries preceded public libraries in providing collections and services to the Asian population as a whole, responding to scholarly needs of their constituents. Some of the notable academic collections of Southeast Asian materials include Harvard's Yen-ching Library, the University of California's collection and Cornell University's Echols Collection.

Among the earliest collections is the Harvard-Yenching Library which dates back to 1879 when Chinese was first offered as part of Harvard's curriculum. The Library was officially formed in 1928 and is known as the largest university library for East Asian research in the Western world. The Vietnamese collection was added in 1973.

The University of California at Berkeley ("UCB") houses one of the best Southeast Asian collections in the U.S., and has over 600,000 holdings. UCB's Southeast Asian studies program began in 1954 to meet a growing national interest in the area, with academic courses being offered in the disciplines of anthropology, geography, linguistics, languages and political science. The Center for Southeast Asia Studies was established in 1960 and the reading room for the center was integrated into Doe Library in 1970, becoming the South/Southeast Asia Library (S/SEAL). The library is available to Bay Area communities as well as to UCB students. Berkeley has participated in the Library of Congress's Southeast Asia Cooperative Acquisitions Program since 1964, and has acquired over 20,000 items through that program. The library has also benefited by many gifts and bequests. The Indochina Archive includes over 300,000 items on the history of the Vietnam War and contemporary Indochina and is directed by Douglas Pike, a former US Foreign Service officer.

Cornell's Echols Collection claims to be the largest collection on Southeast Asia (Barnard) and began in 1919 with a donated collection of Western language books on the Chinese. Funding through the Library of Congress's Overseas Acquisitions Program, as well as through other government programs through the years, has enabled Cornell to add more than 7,000 volumes annually to its collection. The book stacks of the collection are open to the public and all Asian materials are integrated by subject and interfiled on the shelves, regardless of language.

Public libraries

Public libraries have developed Asian collections in response to the changing demographics of their communities. In this respect, Vietnamese collections have tended to come later than other Asian collections, coinciding with the growth of the Vietnamese immigrant population after 1975. I examined two local resources, the Berkeley Public Library and the Oakland Public Library.

Berkeley Public Library's (BPL) Vietnamese collection was begun in 1991, and was closed in 1999. The collection numbered 600 volumes, and was the smallest of BPL's international language collections. Original selection was done under a federal grant and with the direction of a citizens group in Oakland, and had virtually no circulation except through interlibrary loan (ILL). All of the 868 Vietnamese reported to be living in Berkeley in Census 2000 are ethnic Chinese, according to Francisca Goldsmith from the Collections Department. The collection is being deaccessioned and is being moved to the Oakland Public Library in response to low community demand.

The Asia Branch Library of the Oakland Public Library occupies its own space in the Asian Cultural Center and houses eight Asian language collections (Chinese,

Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Tagalog and Laotian) with approximately 70,000 books, CDs and DVDs, magazines and newspapers. The Library has a children's department as well as a growing teen section. Its holdings cover major reference titles and general subject titles with each language shelved separately and include an Asian studies collection and an Asian-American collection in English. The lively, well marked and bustling library has eight computer terminals with Internet access and there is a computer lab that has five computers equipped with a multilingual interface for instructional use. The Asian Branch Library was started in 1975 with a grant funded under the Federal Library Services Construction Act with the express charter to create a model library serving Oakland's Asian community with multilingual staff and collections. The branch was relocated several times, in 1978 being housed in the Main Library and moving to its latest quarters in 1995. Its programs and services include a bilingual story time offered in English and Cantonese, as well as many summer programs for various groups. In addition to the collection at the Asian branch, smaller Vietnamese collections are located at three other branches.

Collection development policies for the Oakland Public dictate that selection criteria include a staff member knowledgeable in the language. According to the policy posted on the Library's website, "New language collections are established after surveys show community need, adequate funding for initial collections is identified and a commitment is made to maintenance of the collection".

Successful service models

The primary components of successful library services to any immigrant population are communication and cultural awareness, community involvement, and funding resources.

Communication and cultural awareness

Communication is central to the success of any library program. For patrons to begin using the library, they must first be aware of the library and its functions.

Vietnamese are known to be studious with respect for education, according to Nguyen and Dao (1998). “The library, therefore, is regarded as another learning institution for young people. Many Vietnamese are unaware that libraries are designed to serve people of all ages, regardless of their lifestyles or backgrounds. To better serve the Vietnamese patrons, libraries should continue to make themselves visible to the Vietnamese community through media connections and community outreach programs, especially in developing a well-rounded collection of Vietnamese materials.” (Nguyen & Dao, 1998).

Among the keys to communicating with ethnic patrons are such things as creating library signs and informational materials in key languages, as well as training library staff on cultural differences in communication styles, such as a cultural tendency common among Asians to avert their eyes and eschew physical contact. Training library staff to avoid idioms and metaphors, to learn everyday phrases in appropriate languages, to be calm and unhurried and to phrase questions carefully are all tactics that can improve communication. (Nguyen & Dao, 1998).

Cataloging to full MARC standards in all languages is important and may require either a bilingual cataloger or a commercial cataloging service in order to ensure accuracy and optimal retrieval of materials. (Wong, et al. 1998)

Of course the best communication strategy is to hire bilingual staff members, and all libraries should attempt to have multilingual capabilities for its service populations. Collections should be developed with the awareness of the specific language requirements of the population being served, understanding that there are many differences not only between languages, but also within the different dialects of the various languages.

Communication also includes being sensitive to cultural differences and political issues, avoiding cultural symbols that may be misunderstood and being “ideologically neutral” (Wong et al. 1998).

Community involvement

Community involvement is essential to developing and promoting library services and collections. One successful model of a library that has managed to serve its diverse populations well is the Linda Vista branch of the San Diego Public Library which serves a large Southeast Asian population, including over 30,000 Vietnamese. This library implemented changes in all functional areas, including staffing, programming and collection development (Hoffert, 1994). The library instituted many programs ranging from English language tutorials, to citizenship workshops to Vietnamese New Year’s celebrations, and even sponsored a Vietnamese dance troupe that tours the city to promote cultural exchange. A key component for the success of the library’s efforts was hiring a multilingual staff. The importance of knowing the community was also emphasized, citing such activities as visiting schools, community centers and businesses, both formally in programmed outreach efforts and informally on an everyday basis. The

library also established a community coalition for each constituency to participate in the decision making aspects of collections and programs.

Effective programming includes workshops, film festivals, musical events- anything to bring people to the library. Popular programs are on topics of importance to the community, such as citizenship, small businesses, legal matters and parenting. Collections should include practical books in the native language of the immigrant populations, study materials and a mix of classic and popular fiction (particularly popular among Chinese and Vietnamese patrons, according to Hoffert's article. The key again is community involvement.

Another example of successful community outreach is the Chinatown branch of San Francisco Public Library which began a "Teen-zine" program, where twice a week, teens, ages 14 to 18, participated in a class at the Library that taught e-journalism, which included reporting, writing, editing as well as web design and programming. Funded by a grant from Libraries for the Future, the goal was to create an online walking tour of Chinatown, and in the process, help acclimate recent immigrants. The program was a great success, and created a new generation of library users.

The community can also be a source for collection materials, with donations from patrons as well as consulates and embassies.

Data gathering approaches

In order to understand the communities they serve, libraries use a variety of data gathering techniques and resources. Commonly used is demographic data from the U. S. Census which gives accurate statistical data on the population as a whole at a particular point in time. One problem with census data is that it may be obsolete as soon as it is

published, since the census is only taken every 10 years, and results take time to compile. While census data may be too broad or too outdated to be relevant to a particular community, libraries can use more localized sources such as school district information, city departments and agencies (such as planning and zoning, chambers of commerce).

Libraries also employ various methods to directly survey their communities, including questionnaires, coalitions, interviews and focus groups (Wong et al. 1998). In all these methods, it is critical that the right questions are asked of the right people, and no single method should be used.

Libraries should also regularly conduct routine needs assessment programs at least every two to three years (Wong, et al. 1998) and make the results public. Then the data should be analyzed and the results should be acted upon, with the necessary changes in programs, services and collections being implemented as a result.

Conclusion

The Asian population in the United States is growing and services to this group need to keep pace with the population growth. Libraries must continuously monitor their constituents to ensure that they are being adequately served. In order to do this, libraries must be closely involved in their communities and should mirror the ethnic diversity of the populations they serve.

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