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VIETNAMESE MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA (1975-1990): A WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Dòng di dân người Việt Nam đến Australia (1975-1990): Tiếp cận từ Lý thuyết Hệ thống Thế giới

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 through Immanuel Wallerstein's World-systems theory, arguing that it reflects a core-periphery dynamic within the global capitalist system. Following the liberation of South Vietnam in 1975, over 55,000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Australia, contributing to a Vietnamese-origin population of 155,000 by 1996, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) and UNHCR (2000) reports. Australia, a core state with a robust economy, benefited from this labor influx and enhanced its geopolitical standing, while Vietnam, a peripheral state devastated by war and economic decline, lost human resources. The findings situate this migration beyond humanitarian narratives, highlighting its role in reinforcing global inequalities. This perspective enriches historical migration studies and suggests broader applications to other refugee flows, underscoring the economic-political structures shaping global mobility.

Keywords: *Vietnamese migration, Australian multiculturalism, World-systems theory, core-periphery, boat people.*

TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này phân tích dòng di dân người Việt Nam đến Australia từ 1975 đến 1990 qua lý thuyết Hệ thống thế giới của Immanuel Wallerstein, lập luận rằng nó phản ánh động lực trung tâm-ngoại vi trong hệ thống tư bản toàn cầu. Sau khi miền Nam Việt Nam được giải phóng năm 1975, hơn 55.000 người tị nạn Việt Nam được tái định cư tại Australia, nâng dân số gốc Việt tại Australia lên 155.000 người vào năm 1996, theo dữ liệu từ Cục Thống kê Australia (1997) và UNHCR (2000). Australia, một quốc gia trung tâm với nền kinh tế mạnh, hưởng lợi từ nguồn lao động này và tăng cường vị thế địa chính trị, trong khi Việt Nam, một quốc gia ngoại vi bị tàn phá bởi chiến tranh và suy thoái kinh tế, mất đi nhân lực. Dòng di cư này, theo những phát hiện của nghiên cứu, không chỉ đơn thuần là vấn đề nhân đạo mà còn phản ánh vai trò của nó trong việc củng cố bất bình đẳng toàn cầu. Quan điểm này không chỉ làm phong phú thêm các nghiên cứu về lịch sử di dân mà còn mở ra những ứng dụng rộng rãi hơn cho việc nghiên cứu các dòng người tị nạn khác, qua đó làm nổi bật vai trò của các cấu trúc kinh tế-chính trị trong việc định hình sự di động trên toàn cầu.

Từ khóa: *Di dân người Việt Nam, Australia đa văn hóa, Lý thuyết Hệ thống thế giới, trung tâm-ngoại vi, người vượt biên bằng đường biển.*

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1. Introduction

On April 30, 1975, the liberation of South Vietnam marked the beginning of one of the 20th century's largest migration crises, as hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled Vietnam seeking safety amid the aftermath of war and political instability. Australia, a nation once defined by the restrictive "White Australia Policy," emerged as a key destination for these refugees between 1975 and 1990, transforming it into a significant chapter in the country's immigration history. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), by 1991, approximately 155,000 people of Vietnamese origin had settled in Australia, with the majority arriving as refugees—often termed "boat people"—escaping the war's devastation and economic collapse (ABS, 1997). Over 55,000 of these individuals were resettled directly from camps in Southeast Asia during the 1970s and 1980s, as reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2000). This phenomenon was not merely a tale of human survival but a reflection of deeper economic and political forces within the global system.

This article examines the migration of Vietnamese to Australia from 1975 to 1990 through the lens of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, a framework designed to explain economic and power inequalities across global regions. Wallerstein (1974) argues that the capitalist world is divided into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones, with core states exploiting resources—including labor—from peripheral regions to sustain their dominance. Within this context, Australia can be viewed as a core state, aligned with the Western bloc and boasting a developed economy, while Vietnam, ravaged by war and economic decline post-1975, exemplifies a peripheral state. The central research question guiding this study is: How does the Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 reflect the core-periphery relationship within Wallerstein's world-systems theory?

Previous studies on Vietnamese migration to Australia have often focused on humanitarian, cultural, or policy dimensions. For instance, Viviani (1984) explored the resettlement challenges faced by Vietnamese refugees in Australia, emphasizing social and economic integration, while Jupp (2001) analyzed their impact on the development of Australia's multicultural policy. However, few have situated this migration within a global theoretical framework like world-systems theory, which could illuminate how it transcends local crises to embody broader economic-political structures. This article posits that Australia's acceptance of Vietnamese refugees, though framed as humanitarian, also served the economic and geopolitical interests of a core state, while Vietnam, as a peripheral state, lost potential labor amid its decline.

The significance of this study lies in its provision of a novel perspective on Vietnamese migration to Australia, moving beyond traditional analyses of cultural identity or national policy. Here is the rewritten version of the original sentence, split into two sentences while preserving its full meaning:

By situating this phenomenon within the context of globalization and economic inequality, this study elucidates how core states like Australia benefit from peripheral

crises. This approach contributes to broader discussions on migration's role in the global capitalist system. Moreover, this analysis may pave the way for applying world-systems theory to other migration flows, such as those from Cambodia or the Middle East, in different historical contexts.

The article is structured as follows. The second section outlines the theoretical framework, detailing Wallerstein's key concepts and their application to the Vietnam-Australia case. The third section describes the research methodology, including primary and secondary sources utilized. The fourth section, the core of the study, provides a detailed analysis of the historical context, Australia's role as a core state, Vietnam as a peripheral state, and their interaction within the world-system. The fifth section expands the scope of the study, placing the findings in dialogue with existing research, while enhancing the critical depth and scholarly engagement of the article. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses their implications for historical and migration studies.

2. Theoretical Framework

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory offers a robust framework for understanding global economic and political dynamics, including migration. Developed in The Modern World-System I (Wallerstein, 1974), this theory posits that since the 16th century, the capitalist world has been organized into a hierarchical system of core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral regions. Core states, characterized by industrialized economies, advanced technology, and strong political power, extract resources—including raw materials, goods, and labor—from peripheral regions, which are often constrained by economic dependency and political instability. Semi-peripheral states serve as intermediaries, exploiting the periphery while being dominated by the core. Within this system, inequality is not merely an outcome but a driving force sustaining the global structure (Wallerstein, 1974).

A critical aspect of world-systems theory is the role of labor as a mobile resource. Wallerstein (1983) emphasizes that migration flows from peripheral to core regions are a hallmark of the global capitalist economy, as core states require cheap labor to meet production demands or offset population shortages. However, this process is not random; it is shaped by power structures, including immigration policies, international relations, and global institutions like the UNHCR. Migration, therefore, is not solely an individual act but a reflection of interactions between regions within the world-system (Wallerstein, 1983).

In the context of Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990, Wallerstein's theory can be applied to interpret this phenomenon as part of a core-periphery dynamic. By the late 20th century, Australia was a core state within the world-system. With a per capita GDP of approximately $18,000 in 1990 (World Bank, 1991), it ranked among the developed economies of the Western bloc, closely tied to the United States and the United Kingdom through alliances like ANZUS. Following the abolition of the "White Australia Policy" in 1973, the country adopted a multicultural immigration policy, opening its doors to non-European immigrants, including

Vietnamese refugees (Jupp, 2001). Accepting refugees not only bolstered Australia's humanitarian image but also met labor demands in its rapidly growing industries, such as manufacturing and services (Castles et al., 1998).

Conversely, Vietnam post-1975 epitomized a peripheral state within the world-system. The Vietnam War (1955-1975) left its economy in ruins, with a per capita GDP of roughly $130 in 1980 (Maddison, 2001). Centralized economic, combined with international isolation due to U.S. sanctions from 1975 to 1994, exacerbated poverty and instability. According to UNHCR (2000), over 1.6 million Vietnamese fled the country between 1975 and 1995, with a significant portion seeking refuge in core states like Australia, the United States, and Canada. This economic and political collapse positioned Vietnam as a labor source for core regions, aligning with Wallerstein's model of periphery-to-core resource extraction.

The interaction between Australia and Vietnam during 1975-1990 vividly illustrates the core-periphery dynamic. Australia's refugee policy, supported by UNHCR and influenced by Western allies like the United States, facilitated the resettlement of over 55,000 Vietnamese from Southeast Asian camps (UNHCR, 2000). Yet, this was not purely altruistic. As Castles et al. (1998) note, Vietnamese immigrants significantly contributed to Australia's workforce, particularly in labor-intensive sectors, supporting the economic growth of a core state. Simultaneously, Vietnam's loss of a substantial young and productive population deepened its peripheral status within the global system.

Based on this framework, the article proposes the central hypothesis that Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 was not merely a humanitarian response but part of a broader economic-political structure. In this structure, Australia, as a core state, benefited from absorbing labor and enhancing its geopolitical standing, while Vietnam, as a peripheral state, suffered a loss of human resources amid its decline. This analysis does not negate cultural or humanitarian factors but complements them with a global dimension to better understand the historical significance of this migration.

3. Methodology and Sources

This article employs a qualitative historical analysis approach, integrated with the application of Wallerstein's world-systems theory, to explore Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990. This method enables the study to reconstruct historical events while situating them within a global theoretical framework, addressing the research question: How does the Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 reflect the core-periphery relationship within Wallerstein's world-systems theory? The historical analysis approach is well-suited for handling diverse sources, from official statistics to secondary studies, while providing a basis to test the hypothesis that this migration exemplifies a core-periphery dynamic (Wallerstein, 1974).

The research process involves comparing two key contexts: Australia as a core state and Vietnam as a peripheral state during 1975-1990. To achieve this, the

study examines economic, political, and social factors driving migration from Vietnam, alongside Australia's immigration policies and the benefits it derived from accepting refugees. Data were collected and evaluated based on their authenticity, reliability, and relevance to the research question.

Primary sources include: (a) immigration reports from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), such as the 1996 Census, which recorded 155,000 people of Vietnamese origin in Australia by that year (ABS, 1997); (b) Australian government documents, including policy reports from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), detailing the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees (DIMA, 1996); and (c) UNHCR reports, notably The State of the World's Refugees (UNHCR, 2000), documenting over 55,000 Vietnamese resettled in Australia from Southeast Asian camps. These primary sources provide accurate statistics and policy context essential for reconstructing the scale and nature of this migration.

Secondary sources encompass academic studies and monographs on Vietnamese migration and Australian immigration history. For example, Viviani's The Long Journey (1984) offers a detailed analysis of Vietnamese refugee settlement, while Immigration and Australia by Castles et al. (1998) provides data on the economic impact of immigrants in labor-intensive industries. Additionally, economic sources like the World Bank's World Development Report 1991 (1991) and Maddison's The World Economy (2001) are used to compare development levels between Australia and Vietnam, reinforcing arguments about their core and peripheral statuses.

Data from these sources were processed by: (a) analyzing statistical trends to identify migration patterns (e.g., annual arrivals from 1975-1990); (b) evaluating Australia's immigration policies to understand how they reflect core state interests; and (c) cross-referencing with Wallerstein's theory to test the core-periphery hypothesis. While the study does not employ complex quantitative methods, the integration of historical data with theory ensures robust, academically sound conclusions.

4. Analysis

This section analyzes Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 through Wallerstein's world-systems theory, focusing on historical context, Australia's role as a core state, Vietnam as a peripheral state, and their interaction within the global system. The analysis tests the hypothesis that this migration reflects not only a humanitarian response but also an economic-political process between core and periphery.

4.1. Historical Context

The reunification of Vietnam on April 30, 1975, marked the end of the Vietnam War (1955-1975), ushering in a period of severe humanitarian and economic crisis. According to UNHCR, between 1975 and 1995, over 1.6 million Vietnamese fled the country, predominantly as "boat people" escaping political instability and economic collapse post-war (UNHCR, 2000). Australia emerged as a key destination, resettling over 55,000 refugees directly from Southeast Asian camps between 1975 and 1990 (UNHCR, 2000). By 1996, the Vietnamese-origin population in Australia

reached approximately 155,000, reflecting growth through both resettlement and family reunification (ABS, 1997).

This migration coincided with a shift in Australian immigration policy. The "White Australia Policy," officially abolished in 1973 under the Whitlam government, gave way to a multicultural approach, opening doors to Asian immigrants, including Vietnamese refugees (Jupp, 2001). From 1975, Australia, in coordination with UNHCR and under pressure from Western allies like the United States, implemented the Special Humanitarian Program, enabling thousands of Vietnamese to resettle. Data from DIMA indicate that over 70,000 Vietnamese arrived between 1975 and 1982, peaking in 1979 with nearly 14,000 arrivals (DIMA, 1996). This context sets the stage for examining how this migration aligns with world-systems theory.

4.2. Australia as a Core State

Within Wallerstein's framework, Australia in the late 20th century was a core state, boasting a developed, industrialized economy and strong ties to Western powers. By 1990, its per capita GDP reached approximately $18,000, far exceeding that of Vietnam (World Bank, 1991). As a member of alliances like ANZUS and part of the Western economic bloc, Australia held significant economic and geopolitical influence in the Asia-Pacific region (Castles et al., 1998). Accepting Vietnamese refugees served both humanitarian and core state interests.

First, Vietnamese refugees contributed to Australia's labor force. In particular, Castles et al. (1998) note that during the 1980s, many Vietnamese settled in industrial areas of Sydney and Melbourne, working in sectors like textiles, food processing, and agriculture—industries reliant on affordable labor. ABS data from 1996 show that 58% of Vietnamese-origin individuals participated in the workforce, a higher rate than some other immigrant groups, indicating their rapid integration as a vital labor resource (ABS, 1997). This aligns with Wallerstein's (1983) argument that core states draw labor from the periphery to sustain economic growth.

Second, the refugee policy enhanced Australia's geopolitical standing. Post-Vietnam War, Australia collaborated closely with the United States in resettling refugees, reinforcing its anti-communist stance and cultivating a progressive multicultural image (Jupp, 2001). DIMA reports (1996) highlight that the refugee program was designed to meet both humanitarian and international strategic goals, such as supporting allies and alleviating pressure from Southeast Asian camps. Thus, Australia not only addressed a humanitarian crisis but also strengthened its position within the world-system.

4.3. Vietnam as a Peripheral State

In contrast, Vietnam post-1975 exemplified a peripheral state within the world-system, reeling from the Vietnam War's devastation and international isolation. The war left its economy in tatters, with a per capita GDP of roughly $130 in 1980 (Maddison, 2001). Centralized economic policies coupled with U.S. sanctions from 1975 to 1994, worsened poverty and instability. A World Bank report (1991) estimates that poverty rates in Vietnam reached 70% in the late 1970s, driving millions into desperation.

This crisis fueled migration. UNHCR

(2000) reports that over 800,000 Vietnamese fled by sea between 1975 and 1990, many targeting core states like Australia, the United States, and Canada for survival and economic opportunity. Viviani (1984) describes these refugees—often farmers, fishermen, or South Vietnam's middle class—as fleeing land loss, property confiscation, and dim prospects under the new regime. This exodus of young, productive labor deepened Vietnam's peripheral status, as it lost human resources critical for recovery.

Within Wallerstein's (1974) framework, Vietnam illustrates a peripheral state indirectly exploited by the core. Though not directly colonized, the migration of its population to Australia transferred labor from periphery to core, reinforcing global economic inequality.

4.4. Core-Periphery Interaction

The interaction between Australia and Vietnam from 1975 to 1990 vividly demonstrates the core-periphery dynamic. UNHCR played a pivotal role in coordinating this migration, with Australia committing to resettle tens of thousands from camps in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia (UNHCR, 2000). However, Australia retained control over who was admitted, prioritizing those capable of labor or quick integration (DIMA, 1996). Thus, this process reflects a core state's authority in managing peripheral labor flows.

Building on this, the role of semi-peripheral states like Malaysia and Thailand, which served as transit points for Vietnamese refugees, enriches the world-systems framework by illustrating the three-tier model. These nations, economically stronger than Vietnam but subordinate to core states like Australia, hosted UNHCR camps, processing thousands of boat people before resettlement (UNHCR, 2000). Their involvement facilitated Australia's selective intake while reinforcing regional hierarchies, as Malaysia and Thailand gained geopolitical leverage without fully controlling migration flows, highlighting nuanced dynamics within the global capitalist system (Wallerstein, 1974).

The outcome was Vietnamese integration into Australian society, often in low-tier jobs. ABS (1997) data reveal that by 1996, 40% of Vietnamese-origin individuals worked in manufacturing and service sectors, earning below-average incomes compared to native-born Australians. This aligns with Wallerstein's (1983) view that peripheral labor occupies lower economic rungs in core states, perpetuating structural inequality. Meanwhile, Vietnam's loss of a significant young population slowed its economic recovery during the 1980s.

In summary, Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 was not solely a humanitarian phenomenon but an economic-political process wherein Australia, as a core state, benefited from labor and international prestige, while Vietnam, a peripheral state, suffered human resource losses amid crisis.

5. Discussion

The application of Wallerstein's world-systems theory to Vietnamese migration to Australia (1975–1990) reframes this phenomenon as a structured outcome of global capitalist inequalities, offering a counterpoint to traditional humanitarian or cultural narratives. By situating Australia as a core state and

Vietnam as peripheral, this study challenges the localized focus of prior works, such as Viviani's (1984) emphasis on refugee integration or Jupp's (2001) analysis of multiculturalism's evolution. Instead, it underscores how migration flows serve as mechanisms for core states to extract resources—here, labor—while peripheral states bear the cost of human capital depletion, a pattern consistent with wider migration research

This perspective aligns with Portes and Walton's (1981) argument that peripheral labor underpins core economies, but it extends their framework by highlighting the geopolitical dimensions of refugee resettlement. Unlike economic migrants, Vietnamese refugees were integrated into Australia's labor market through humanitarian policies, yet their concentration in low-wage sectors reflects a structural inequality akin to that observed in other core-periphery labor flows, such as Mexican migration to the United States (Sassen, 1999). This suggests that humanitarianism, while ostensibly altruistic, often aligns with core states' economic imperatives, a tension that invites comparison with contemporary refugee frameworks like the Global Compact on Refugees. Betts' (2011) critique of migration governance as serving core states' interests finds a historical parallel here, as Australia's selective resettlement policies prioritized labor potential and geopolitical alignment over equitable burden-sharing with peripheral regions.

The study also prompts a reevaluation of Australian multiculturalism's role within global systems. Rather than solely a progressive policy shift, as Jupp (2001) suggests, multiculturalism can be seen as a strategic adaptation that enabled Australia to navigate post-colonial labor demands while projecting a cosmopolitan identity. This duality mirrors strategies in other core states, such as Canada's selective immigration model, which balances economic needs with humanitarian rhetoric. By situating multiculturalism within the world-system, this analysis reveals its function as a tool for managing global labor flows, a perspective that could inform studies of other multicultural societies.

While this study illuminates systemic drivers, it also highlights the need to integrate macro-level analyses with micro-level perspectives. Vietnamese refugees' agency in forming resilient communities, as Viviani (1984) documents, suggests that peripheral actors can challenge systemic constraints, a dimension underexplored here. Future research could combine world-systems theory with ethnographic methods to examine how migrant agency interacts with global structures, offering a more holistic understanding of migration dynamics. Additionally, applying this framework to contemporary flows—such as Syrian or Rohingya refugee movements—could test its relevance in an era of heightened securitization and climate-driven displacement, potentially incorporating interdisciplinary lenses like environmental or postcolonial theory.

By engaging with these debates, this study not only repositions Vietnamese migration as a feature of global capitalism but also contributes to migration studies' political economy. It challenges scholars to interrogate the interplay of humanitarianism and economic interests in shaping global mobility, affirming the

enduring utility of Wallerstein's (1974) theory for interpreting migration's structural underpinnings.

6. Conclusion

This study has analyzed Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 through Wallerstein's world-systems theory, demonstrating that it was not merely a humanitarian response but a facet of the global economic-political dynamic between core and periphery. From the liberation of South Vietnam in 1975 to 1990, over 55,000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Australia from Southeast Asian camps, with the Vietnamese-origin population growing to approximately 155,000 by 1996 (ABS, 1997; UNHCR, 2000). The analysis reveals that Australia, as a core state, leveraged this migration to bolster its labor force and geopolitical standing, while Vietnam, a peripheral state, lost human resources amid economic decline.

Key findings can be summarized as follows. First, the historical context from 1975 to 1990 shows that Vietnamese migration was driven by post-war crisis and shaped by Australia's multicultural immigration policies, with over 70,000 arrivals between 1975 and 1982 (DIMA, 1996). Second, Australia, with a per capita GDP of about $18,000 in 1990 (World Bank, 1991), utilized Vietnamese refugees as a low-cost labor source in industries like textiles and agriculture, while enhancing its international reputation through cooperation with UNHCR and Western allies (Castles et al., 1998). Third, Vietnam, with a per capita GDP of roughly $130 in 1980 (Maddison, 2001), lost a significant portion of its young workforce, exacerbating its peripheral status. Finally, the core-periphery interaction, mediated by organizations like UNHCR, illustrates how core states control and benefit from peripheral labor flows, with Vietnamese in Australia often relegated to lower economic positions (ABS, 1997).

This study contributes to scholarship by offering a fresh perspective on Vietnamese migration to Australia, moving beyond traditional humanitarian or cultural analyses. Unlike Viviani's (1984) focus on refugee settlement or Jupp's (2001) exploration of multicultural policy, this analysis situates the phenomenon within a global economic-political structure, using Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory to highlight how inequality between core and periphery shapes migration flows. It enriches our understanding of this historical event as a feature of the capitalist world-system.

The broader implications lie in the potential to apply this theoretical framework to other migration flows. For instance, refugee movements from Cambodia to Australia during the same period or from Afghanistan to Western states in recent decades could be similarly analyzed to assess the role of core states in managing peripheral crises. Additionally, the study raises questions about the sustainability of humanitarian immigration policies when they simultaneously serve core states' economic and political interests—a topic relevant to contemporary global migration debates.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations that future research could address. First, its focus on the core-periphery dynamic may not fully capture cultural or individual factors driving Vietnamese migration, such as desires to preserve identity or seek

political freedom. Second, the analysis relies heavily on Australian (ABS, DIMA) and international (UNHCR) data, with limited access to Vietnamese records from this period due to archival constraints. Future studies could incorporate Vietnamese perspectives or explore the role of semi-peripheral states, like Thailand or Malaysia, as transit points for refugees.

In conclusion, Vietnamese migration to Australia from 1975 to 1990 exemplifies Wallerstein's world-systems theory, with Australia, as a core state, capitalizing on Vietnam's peripheral crisis to enhance its economic and geopolitical position. These findings not only deepen our understanding of Vietnamese migration history but also invite scholars to reconsider global migration as a structured economic-political phenomenon. In a world increasingly defined by inequality and mobility, this approach offers a vital tool for interpreting both past and present migration dynamics.

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