
Sample Lesson 18: Hmong Americans—Community, Struggle, Voice

Theme: History and Movement

Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 2, 4

Standards Alignment:

HSS Content Standard: 11.11.1

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 2, 3, 7; W.9–10.1; SL.9–10.1

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

Overview: Hmong Americans are seen as Asian Americans, yet they have a very unique experience and history in the US. The goal of this lesson is to delve deeply into their experience and understand their formation as a community and as a voice within American society. This lesson uses the voices of Hmong women, men, girls, and boys, as well as an article from the Amerasia Journal, to create an understanding of the issues and experiences of the Hmong American community.

Key Terms and Concepts: Hmong, oral history, Laos, CIA, Refugee Act of 1980, Asian American, Secret War in Laos, patriarchy, refugee

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Better understand the diversity of experiences of Hmong Americans by engaging a range of primary and secondary sources, including oral histories, poems, and scholarly articles
- Write their own spoken word piece about their lived experiences. In doing so, students will gain key skills in how to develop and structure poetry, as well as techniques for performing

Essential Questions:

1. What are the Hmong refugee and resettlement experiences in the US?
2. How did first generation Hmong immigrants' experiences differ from those of their children who were born in the US? How did gender factor into differing experiences?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Day 1—Hmong Immigrant Experience and Hmong Americans

1. The teacher tells the class: If anyone here has experiences or a personal identity that they feel could help others better understand this content, feel free, but you are not required, to add to our discussions.
2. The teacher tells students that they are going to learn about the Hmong community in America and focus on two essential questions, then reads essential questions 1–2 aloud.
3. The teacher presents some basic information about the Hmong community. The teacher asks students what type of information would be useful in learning more about the Hmong community and writes their questions on the whiteboard.
4. The teacher leads a read aloud of the **Quick Fact Sheet About the Hmong Community in the US** (located at the end of the lesson). Alternate choral reading—the teacher reads one fact, the whole class reads the next fact, while the teacher walks around the room.
5. The teacher asks which of the essential questions have been answered by the information presented. Go through the questions and answers.
6. The teacher leads a deeper discussion about the Hmong experience in the US, focusing on the essential questions. The teacher shows “Starting Again in the Refugee Camp,” a video interview of a Hmong couple who immigrated to the US. Note that students should think about the hardships that these immigrants endured to get to the US as they watch the video. Teachers should tell students that the following videos can be traumatizing for some. After each video the teacher can provide students time to process the information through discussion and reflection facilitated by the teacher.

“Starting Again in the Refugee Camp” is a short documentary about Pang Ge Yang and Mee Lee. It is an incredible story of love, loss, and hope. At the end of the Secret War, Pang Ge Yang escapes from Laos into Thailand. During the harsh journey through the jungle Pang Ge’s pregnant wife dies, and he is unable to leave her body for three days. Mee Lee is also fleeing war-torn Laos, and her husband dies during the escape. Mee found herself as a widow, near death in a Thailand refugee camp. After they lose everything, a miracle happens and these two widows find each other and a new reason for life. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link178> (9 mins)

7. As homework, students can conduct research on outstanding questions from the first activity of the lesson.

Day 2—Compare and Contrast of Genders in the Hmong Community

1. The teacher shows spoken word poems by two teenage Hmong young women. As students watch the videos, they should think about how these individuals have developed their identity as Hmong American and consider what it is like to be a young Hmong American woman.

“Spoken Word ‘Being a Hmong American’”

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link179>

2. After the videos, students do a think, write, pair/share, group share exercise. The teacher writes this question on the board: How do these poets describe their experiences and young Hmong American women? Students think about the question for one minute in silence, write for two to three minutes, and then share their written thoughts with a partner.

Some important things to point out in the discussion:

- Facing challenges of navigating two worlds, the world of their parents and the pressures of American society, the language barrier with their parents, and not being fully accepted into American society
 - Feeling frustration when they are not recognized or identified as Hmong, but rather called Chinese or from Hong Kong
 - Living in a patriarchy, family expectations, and family hypocrisies
 - Feeling like they need more support to succeed in school but failing to receive that support within the American education system
 - Feeling proud to be Hmong and a daughter
 - Learning how to embrace their heritage and culture but at the same time pursue their dreams of going to college
 - Developing an identity of their own as proud Hmong Americans
3. Students read pages 113–116 of the article “Criminalization and Second-Generation Hmong American Boys” by Bao Lo. As they read, students should think about a question similar to the one in the previous step: What have been the general experiences of young Hmong American men?
 - a. Students use the annotation chart (located at the end of the lesson) and annotate as they read the article by adding a symbol next to a sentence that corresponds to their thinking or feeling about the text. Students should prepare to answer the question using evidence from the text.

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- b. The class has a reflective discussion on the following question: According to the author, Bao Lo, what have been the general experiences of young Hmong American men?
 - c. Some important things for the teacher to point out in the discussion:
 - i. Similar to young African American and Latino males, young Hmong males are thought of as gangsters, dropouts, and delinquents by some law enforcement and authority figures.
 - ii. The invisibility of Asian American and Pacific Islander groups regarding incarceration and criminalization in research and public policy indicates a need to understand it better.
 - iii. Teachers often treat baggy clothing, quietness, and swaggering of Hmong boys as deviant.
 - iv. This implicit bias among authority members leads to racial profiling of Hmong boys and leads to the boys feeling isolation and frustration.
 - v. The criminalization of men and boys of color goes hand in hand with the decriminalization of white males. As a result, white criminality is less controlled, surveilled, and punished, while Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian criminality is treated as threatening and in need of punishment.

Making Connections to the *History–Social Science Framework*:

Chapter 16 of the framework includes a description of the impact of the Vietnam War, including the experiences of refugees. On pages 423–425 there is a classroom example where students study the impact of the war on the United States. Teachers can extend that context to this lesson by asking students to research the following questions:

- How did the Vietnam War affect Hmong immigration to the United States?
 - How the experience of the war affect perceptions of Hmong immigrants?
4. Assessment—To show evidence of what students have learned the teacher can choose one of two assignments:
 - a. Students write a paragraph of five to ten sentences answering each essential question using evidence from the sources in the lesson.
 - b. Students write a spoken word poem expressing their identity.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection:

See step 4 above.

Materials and Resources:

- “Starting Again in the Refugee Camp” (a short documentary about Pang Ge Yang and Mee Lee) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link180>
- Bao Lo. 2018. “Criminalization and Second-Generation Hmong American Boys,” *Amerasia Journal* 44 (2): 113–126.
- Hmong Story 40 Project (a series of video interviews and documentaries of Hmong refugees and immigrants) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link181>
- Quick Fact Sheet About the Hmong Community in the US (below)
- Think Write Pair/Share Group Share Handout (below)
- Annotation Chart (below)

Quick Fact Sheet About the Hmong Community in the US

- The Hmong are an ethnic group that lives in the mountains primarily in southern China, Laos, Burma, northern Vietnam, and Thailand. They are a subgroup of the Miao ethnic group and have more than one dialect within and among the different Hmong communities.
- During the Vietnam War, Laos also experienced a civil war in which three princes sought control over the Royal Lao Government. One of the princes sought support from the Vietnamese communists, while the other sought support from the US. Both sides recruited Hmong to join their military forces.
- The most successful in recruiting Hmong was the Royal Lao Government, which was backed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).
- In 1961, 18,000 young Hmong men joined the US-backed armies in the Secret War in Laos with the promise that the Royal Lao Government and the US would take care of them if Laos fell to the communists.
- When Vietnam and Laos fell to the communists in 1973, the Hmong were persecuted by the communists, causing most to flee their homeland. The majority crossed the Mekong River and made their way to Thailand to live in refugee camps.
- Several families stayed in these camps for years until being processed and either returned to their home countries or sent to the US.
- The US Refugee Act of 1980 brought over 200,000 Hmong families to live in cities spread across the US from 1980 to 2000.
- Over the years, the Hmong migrated to Hmong ethnic enclaves within US cities in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.
- From the mid-1980s to the 2000s there has been a gradual rise in Hmong undergraduate college enrollment, particularly in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California. This has led to college courses on the Hmong language and Hmong American history and culture.
- Today there are large Hmong communities in Fresno, St. Paul, Minneapolis, Sacramento, Merced, Milwaukee, Wausau, and Green Bay, with the total population over 300,000.
- The Hmong have played a key role in helping farm communities grow and flourish.
- The rich Hmong culture includes embroidery, story clothes, ghost stories, and many rituals.
- Although the Hmong fall under the category of Asian American in the US, they endure one of the highest poverty rates, at 37.8% in 2004, among all ethnic

groups in the US. They do not receive the services they need because they have been categorized under the Asian American group, which has a lower poverty rate as a whole. Asian American as a category is an aggregate of more than 25 ethnic groups that have diverse histories and experiences in the United States.

- The Hmong struggle with the dual identities of being labeled as the model minority and as criminals for the young males.

Sources:

Minnesota Historical Society. Hmong Timeline.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link182>.

Vincent K. Her, and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, eds. 2012. *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizen*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press.

Dee Thao, director. 2013. "Searching for Answers: Retracing a Hmong Heritage." <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link183>.

Yang Sao Xiong. 2012. "An Analysis of Poverty in Hmong American Communities." In *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Mark Edward Pfeifer, Monica Chiu, and Kou Yang. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Think Write Pair/Share Group Share

Essential Question: ...

Think for one minute about how the source had details that answered the essential question.

Write for one minute about the details and facts you can remember from the source that address the essential question.

Pair/Share for one minute per person. Share out your thinking and writing about the essential question using the sources provided. Be ready to share out the information your partner provided if the teacher calls on you.

Group Share for five to ten minutes. After group share, the class will share out information, giving you a chance to present to your peers.

Annotation Chart

Symbol	Comment/Question/ Response	Sample Language Support
?	Questions I have	The sentence ... is unclear because ...
	Confusing parts for me	I don't understand what is meant when the author says ...
+	Ideas/statements I agree with	I agree with the author's statement that ... because ...
		Similar to the author, I also believe that ... because ...
-	Ideas/statements I disagree with	I disagree with the author's statement that ... because ...
		The author claims that ... However, I disagree because ...
*	Author's main points	One significant idea in this text is ...
	Key ideas expressed	One argument the author makes is that ...
!	Shocking statements or parts	I was shocked to read that ... (further explanation)
	Surprising details/claims	The part about ... made me feel ... because ...
o	Ideas/sections you connect with	This section reminded me of ...
	What this reminds you of	I can connect with what the author said because ... This experience connects with my own experience in that ...