
Sample Lesson 25: Vietnamese American Experiences—The Journey of Refugees

Theme: History and Movement

1. What does it mean to live on this land? Who may become an American? What happens when multiple narratives are layered on top of each other?
2. How should societies integrate newcomers? How do newcomers develop a sense of belonging to the places where they have arrived?
3. How does migration affect the identities of individuals, communities, and nations?
4. How do ideas about who may belong in a nation affect immigration policy, the lives of immigrants, and host communities?
5. What role have immigrants played in defining notions of democracy?

Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 2, 6

Standards Alignment:

HSS Content Standard: 11.11.1: Discuss the reasons for the nation's changing immigration policy, with emphasis on how the Immigration Act of 1965 and successor acts have transformed American society.

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.11–12.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; W.11–12.1; SL.11–12.1

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

The lesson focuses on the history, politics, culture, contributions, challenges, and current status of Vietnamese Americans in the United States.

Overview: Vietnamese Americans play an integral part in shaping the US's multicultural and multilingual transformation. To understand this process, we must examine the following:

- **Vietnamese Refugees:** Vietnamese refugees arrived in waves from 1975 to 1995. Some refugees escaped Vietnam in boats, while others were repatriated to other countries. There are estimates that up to two million people escaped by boats and approximately half of them perished in the high seas. Many faced hunger, thirst, piracy, or other traumatic experiences during their journeys. Many others who were not able to flee remained in Vietnam and faced economic hardships, persecution, and reeducation camps, from the totalitarian government led

by the Communist Party. The international community made great efforts to support these coming waves of refugees, but that was exhausted around 1995 when countries began to stop accepting these refugees and forced them to return to their homeland. The boat people saga and the hypervisibility of the plight of refugees forced the US, and the international community, to negotiate with Vietnam to allow immigration of subsequent waves of Vietnamese leaving Vietnam through other humanitarian programs under the auspices of family reunification, particularly for former political prisoners, Amerasian children, and former employees of the US government. Most of the refugees were accepted for resettlement to sanctuary countries all over the world, and many resettled in the US. The resettling refugees were first scattered all over the US, but most of them eventually congregated around the largest concentrations of Vietnamese communities, in Orange County, San Jose, Houston, Virginia, and Florida.

- **New Life in America.** Most Vietnamese refugees arrived in America without any preparation economically, educationally, or culturally. Children were enrolled in schools at their age level with a new language and education system and limited support. Adults were either enrolled in adult schools or began new lives with new job skills or life experiences which were totally different from their lives in Vietnam. Many refugees who settled in the US had no proof of certification of their trades or professional careers. They worked in manually laborious jobs that did not require a mastery of the English language. Many Vietnamese children adapted well in American schooling, but their parents or adult relatives were less successful. Overall, they adapted well in their new homeland, but the scars of the war, life under communist rule, boat escapes, and cultural shock upon arrival in America remained with many of them in varying degrees.
- **Vietnamese American Success and Contributions.** The Vietnamese have been resettled throughout the US with varying degrees of success, and California is home to many of the largest Vietnamese communities outside of the Vietnam. In California, there are large Vietnamese American communities in Orange County, San Jose, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Sacramento. Vietnamese students make up one of the highest performing groups academically. Vietnamese Americans have made large contributions in high tech businesses, health care, and education, and as high-ranking military officers and government officials. Despite some successes, the Vietnamese American community continues to have some of the lowest levels of education and income and is one of the most linguistically isolated and English proficiency limited communities compared to the general population.

Key Terms and Concepts: Vietnamese Americans, refugees, oral histories

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

- Enhance understanding and analyze the refugee experiences of Vietnamese Americans by engaging in a variety of primary and secondary sources, including oral histories, books, documentaries, scholarly articles, and community programs and resources
- Introduce the distinction between refugees, those who seek political and economic refuge as a result of the various wars that took place on Vietnam soil, and immigrants in America seeking opportunity for a better life
- Conduct an interview with someone who is a Vietnamese refugee or listen to archived interviews of Vietnamese refugees; develop and ask questions that explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese refugees; record and transcribe the interviews; and analyze the transcription and create a presentation (using various formats such as PowerPoint, video, paper) on the experiences of Vietnamese refugees

Essential Questions:

1. What is the history of Vietnamese Americans in the US?
2. How has the cultural perception of Vietnamese people and Vietnamese Americans been shaped and framed by mainstream discourse in the US?
3. How did the first-generation Vietnamese refugees' experiences differ from those of their children who were born in the US? How did their refugee status factor into differing experiences?
4. Why is the Vietnamese American experience important to understand within the context of Asian American studies and US history? What are the differences between the refugee and immigrant experience?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Day 1

1. The teacher begins the lesson by asking students, "Tell me one thing about you that shapes your experiences and how you see the world." This provides students with the opportunity to hear the various perspectives.
 - a. Students engage in writing an "I Am From ..." poem. Students write a three-stanza poem that speaks to their identity, background, and experience, and where they are from. Each line of the poem begins with "I am from ..." and students should follow with something specific about their life, upbringing, and identity. Teachers can provide examples. Allow students 10 to 15

minutes to write their poem. After everyone has finished writing, students can share their poems in class throughout this lesson.

2. The teacher tells students that they are going to learn about Vietnamese Americans and focus on four essential questions (read essential questions 1–4 aloud).
3. The teacher asks students what they know about Vietnam and its relationship to the United States. “What comes to mind when you think of Vietnam?”
4. The teacher presents some basic information about Vietnamese American history and Vietnamese Americans via article, poem, PowerPoint, or other presentation method. See the following for suggested short video clips to share with students. Teachers should note that some materials may be sensitive for some students.
 - a. PBS American Experience: Last Days in Vietnam Collection – Refugees: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link270>
 - b. PBS Asian Americans Collection – Southeast Asian Refugees: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link271>
5. The teacher leads a read aloud of the Quick Fact Sheet about Vietnamese Americans in the US. Alternate choral reading—the teacher reads one fact, the whole class reads the next fact, while the teacher walks around the room. The Quick Fact Sheet is attached.
 - a. After the watching the videos and reviewing the Quick Fact Sheet, the teacher asks students to draft a set of questions on what they would like to learn more about the Vietnamese refugees based on the information provided. Prompting questions may include: What questions do you have about the refugee experience? What would you like to know more about the refugee experiences of Vietnamese Americans? Whose story is being told? Whose narrative is being left out? The class writes down and compiles a list of shared questions.

For homework, students can conduct research on the outstanding questions.

Day 2

1. The teacher begins a deeper discussion about the Vietnamese refugee experience in the US, focusing on the essential questions. The teacher then shows additional video clips showcasing the diversity of experiences for refugees and their families in the United States and asks students to reflect on how the video clips address how refugees are being portrayed in the context of racism and discrimination in the US.

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- a. PBS WQED Specials: Vietnam: Another View
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link272>
 - b. PBS Finding Refuge in KC: Hank
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link273>
 - c. PBS Borders and Heritage: In Washington, a Vietnamese Refugee Lives Life in Limbo
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link274>
2. After watching the video clips, students engage in a think, write, pair/share exercise, followed by a group share exercise, guided by the following questions:
 - a. How do Vietnamese Americans describe their refugee experience? How do experiences differ for Vietnamese refugees and their families and children who were raised in the US?
 - b. How were/are Vietnamese refugees being perceived by both Vietnamese Americans and the American public?
 - c. How was/is the Vietnamese refugee experience being shaped by racial and discrimination policy and practices in the US?
 - d. How are the Vietnamese refugee experiences similar to and different from other immigrant groups?

Some important things to point out in the discussion:

- The wars in Southeast Asia have been framed by a general understanding in mainstream discourse of the Vietnam War as a proxy war to a global Cold War between two international superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, as a precursor to discussions surrounding communist/anti-communist political ideological difference and divide that would exacerbate the experiences of resettling Vietnamese later.
- Many Vietnamese refugees experience loss, trauma, and suffering as they flee their homeland and seek political and economic refuge in a foreign land.
- Being caught between two worlds, Vietnamese Americans are neither accepted by the country they left behind nor by the United States given their refugee status, a reminder of the war that the US played a role in.
- Discuss the Vietnamese American community development over the past four decades—its resettlement from refugee camps to recognized ethnic enclaves throughout California and the US.
- Explore the racial inequalities and discriminatory practices experienced by Asian Americans and how they negatively impact the Vietnamese community. The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the racial and socioeconomic disparities

that communities of color experience. (The California governor's remarks about nail salons as the center of community spread of the widespread illness has a negative impact on the industry and its workers.)

- Recognize the growth, development, and contributions that many Vietnamese Americans are making to shape the diversity of America.

Homework/Action/Assessment

To demonstrate learning of the material, students can choose between two activities to complete as a homework assignment. The options are:

1. The teacher provides students with a resource list of various articles and short books narrated through the perspective of Vietnamese American refugees. Students are to choose at least three resources and write a two-page essay answering the reflection questions below.
 - a. Book: *Being Vietnamese in America* (Hãy Sống “Mỹ” Một Cách Rất “Việt Nam”) by Nguyen Ha Tran: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link275>
 - b. Book: *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui
 - c. Article: “Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective” by Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, in *Journal of Asian American Studies*: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link276>
 - d. Article: “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship” by Yến Lê Espiritu, in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link277>
 - e. Article: “April 30” by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link278>
 - f. Article: “Our Vietnam War Never Ended” by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link279>
 - g. Article: “Author Viet Thanh Nguyen on the Struggles of Being a Refugee in America” by David Canfield: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link280>
 - h. Article: “Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype. And it Creates Inequality for All” by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link281>
 - i. Excerpt: Prologue and introduction from *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Reflection Questions:

- Viet Thanh Nguyen’s book *Nothing Ever Dies* begins with the statement, “all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.” Drawing from the chosen articles and books, how might this make sense in different ways for the first generation of Vietnamese refugees and their second-generation Vietnamese American children?
 - What is it like to be Vietnamese American today?
 - How is the identity of Vietnamese Americans being shaped? What is visible and what is invisible?
2. Students conduct oral histories by interviewing Vietnamese refugees using the set of questions that the class has compiled in activity 5(a) of day 1. Students can personalize their project by considering how their personal and/or family stories connect to the Vietnamese American experience, how the Vietnamese American experience connects to the larger historical narratives, and how and why some narratives have been privileged over others. For students who do not have personal or family connections, the teacher can prepare ahead of time to help connect students to Vietnamese American-serving organizations. Lastly, students may consider how to improve their own community, what constructive actions can be taken, and whether they provide a model for change for those in other parts of the state, country, and world.

See: REFUGENE “The Family Stories Project” storytelling kit for oral history resources in partnership with the Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link282>

Students will write a two-page essay answering each of the guiding questions below using evidence from the oral histories collected.

Guiding Questions:

- a. How has the refugee experience shaped the identity of Vietnamese Americans?
- b. What are the stories that were told and what remains invisible?
 - Why did some remain invisible? What conversation topics or themes were more difficult to talk about?
- c. What emotions and/or trauma arise from refugees in sharing their experiences?
- d. How do Vietnamese Americans see themselves in relation to other Asian American communities?
- e. What are the hopes and dreams for the next generation of Vietnamese Americans?

Making Connections to the *History-Social Science Framework*

Chapter 14 of the framework includes the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, which brought attention to the discrimination faced by various ethnic groups after generations of prejudice, discrimination, and discriminatory policies and practices against communities of color. (Hispanic farm workers, Native Americans, and African Americans, among others, protested against the heavy hand of racism in housing, employment, and educational opportunities.) Following the Civil Rights Movement, California's diversity increased only after President Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, opening the door to increasingly large numbers of immigrants from Asia and Central America (page 297). Students may analyze the push and pull factors that contributed to shifting immigration patterns, but they should also learn about changes in immigration policy (page 299). Two guiding questions for this chapter include **1) What did protests and frustrations expressed by Californians in the late Cold War Era reveal about the state?** and **2) In what directions is California growing in the twenty-first century?**

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection: See above

Materials and Resources:

- Video: PBS American Experience: Last Days in Vietnam Collection – Refugees: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link283>
- Video: PBS Asian Americans Collection – Southeast Asian Refugees: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link284>
- Book: *Being Vietnamese in America* (Hãy Sống “Mỹ” Một Cách Rất “Việt Nam”) by Nguyen Ha Tran: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link285>
- Book: *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui
- Article: “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship” by Yến Lê Espiritu, in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link286>
- Article: “April 30” by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link287>
- Article: “Our Vietnam War Never Ended” by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link288>
- Article: “Author Viet Thanh Nguyen on the Struggles of Being a Refugee in America” by David Canfield: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link289>

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- Article: “Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype. And it Creates Inequality for All” by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link290>
 - Audio/Podcast: “Viet Thanh Nguyen—‘Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War’”: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link291>
 - REFUGENE “The Family Stories Project” storytelling kit for oral history resources in partnership with the Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link292>

Supplemental Resources:

- *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People*, edited by Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Quang Huynh (stories directly from refugees)
- *Hearts of Sorrow* by James M. Freeman (stories directly from refugees)
- *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Thi Diem Thuy Le
- *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* by Lisa Lowe
- *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* by Le Ly Hayslip
- *I Love You as for White People* by Lac Su
- *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* by Yến Lê Espiritu
- *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Quick Fact Sheet about Vietnamese Americans in the US

- Vietnamese Americans (Người Mỹ gốc Việt) make up about half of all overseas Vietnamese (Người Việt hải ngoại, also known as Việt Kiều) and are the fourth-largest Asian American ethnic group after Chinese, Filipinos, and Indian Americans.
- The Vietnamese community in the United States was minimal until the South Vietnamese refugees arrived in the US following the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. Early refugees were refugee boat people who fled political persecution or sought economic opportunities as a result of US involvement in the war in Vietnam.
- More than half of Vietnamese Americans reside in the two most populous states, California and Texas, primarily in large urban areas. Orange County, California, is home to the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam.
- As a relatively recent immigrant group, most Vietnamese Americans are either first or second-generation Americans. As many as one million people five years of age and older speak Vietnamese at home, making it the fifth most spoken language in the US.
- April 30, 1975, marked the fall of Saigon, which ended the Vietnam War. It prompted the first large-scale wave of immigration. Many immigrants had close ties to the US or the South Vietnam government and feared communist reprisals. Most of the first-wave immigrants were well educated, financially comfortable, and proficient in English.
- The period from 1978 to the mid-1980s marked the second wave of Vietnamese refugees. Political and economic instability under the new communist government led many to escape Vietnam by small, crowded, and unsafe fishing boats. The second wave of refugees generally had a lower socioeconomic status, as most were peasant farmers or fishermen, small-town merchants, or former military officials. Survivors were picked up by foreign ships and brought to asylum camps in countries that agreed to accept them.
- After suffering war and psychological trauma, Vietnamese immigrants had to adapt to a very different culture. Language was the first barrier Vietnamese refugees with limited English proficiency had to overcome. Still today, Vietnamese Americans have the highest rate of limited English proficiency compared to Asian Americans as a whole and compared to other racial groups. This adversely affects many socioeconomic outcomes due to poor language access for resources and support.
- Emotional health is still considered an issue common to many Vietnamese refugees.

Sources

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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.