

Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Sample Lesson 1: Vietnamese American Experiences – The Journey of Refugees

Grade Level: 11-12

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, 6,7

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 America’s multicultural and multilingual transformation. To understand this process, we must examine the following:

- **Vietnamese Refugees:** Vietnamese refugee experience include escapes by boats to neighboring countries from 1975 to 1995. There were estimates of up to two millions of people escaping by boats and approximately half of them perished in the high seas. Many faced hunger, thirst, piracy or other traumatic experiences during their journeys. The international community made great efforts to support these coming waves of refugees, but exhausted around 1995 when it

started to stop accepting these refugees and forcing them to return to their homeland. The boat people saga and the hypervisibility of the plight of refugees forced the U.S., and the international community, to negotiate with Vietnam to allow other waves of Vietnamese leaving through other humanitarian programs under the auspices of family reunification that particularly targeted former political prisoners, Amerasian children, and former employees of the U.S. government. Most of the refugees were accepted for resettlement to sanctuary countries all over the world, and many resettled in the U.S. The resettling refugees were first scattered all over the U.S., but most of them eventually congregated around largest concentrations of Vietnamese communities in Orange County, San Jose, Houston, Virginia or Florida.

- **New Life in America.** Most of 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 normal lives in Vietnam. Many refugees who settled in the U.S. 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 shocks upon arrival in America continued with many of them in varying degrees. Those scars foster their anti-communist sentiments and strong pride in and gratitude to America which welcomes them as refugees, while at the same time nostalgically yearning for the day in which they can return to their homeland.
- **Vietnamese American Success and Contributions.** The Vietnamese have been resettled throughout the U.S. with varying degree 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 make up the 2nd largest world language in public schools, only after Spanish but before Chinese if Mandarin and Cantonese are considered different dialects. Vietnamese Americans have also made large contributions in high-tech businesses, health care, education, military high-ranking officers or government officials. Despite the successes, the

Vietnamese American community remains the community which has the lowest level of education, low level of median income or most linguistically isolated, i.e., depending on language assistance.

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, community programs and resources.
- Introduce the distinction between refugees, those who seek political and economic refuge as a result of the various wars taken place on Vietnam soil, and immigrants in America seeking for opportunity for a better life.
- Conduct an interview of someone who is a Vietnamese refugee or to listen to archived interviews of Vietnamese refugees. Students will develop and ask questions that explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese refugees. Students will record and transcribe the interviews. Students 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 U.S.?
2. How has the cultural perception of Vietnamese people and Vietnamese Americans been shaped and framed by mainstream discourse in the U.S.?
3. How did the first-generation Vietnamese refugees' experiences differ from their children who were born in the U.S. 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 U.S. history? What are the differences between the refugee and immigrant experience?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

1. The teacher begins the lesson by asking students, “Tell me one think about you that shapes your experiences and how you see the world.” This provides the students with the opportunity to hear the various perspectives.
 - a. Students engage in writing “I am From...” poem. Students write a three-stanza poem that speaks to their identity, background, experience, and where they are from. Each line of the poem begins with “I am From...” and should follow something specific about their life, upbringing, and identity. Teachers can provide examples. Allow students 10-15 minutes to write their poem. After everyone has finished writing, students can share their poems in class throughout this lesson (5-6 poems shared per day).
2. The teacher tells students that they are going to learn about Vietnamese Americans and focus on three essential questions (read essential questions 1–3 aloud).
3. The teacher asks students about 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. The teacher asks students, “what questions do you have about the refugee experience? what would you like to know more about the refugee experiences of Vietnamese Americans? Please write them down.”
 - a. National Geographic resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the U.S.:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/resettling-vietnamese-refugees-united-states/>
 - b. The Vietnamese Refugees relive their escapes to Malaysia:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRSffhfYDM>
 - c. AJ+ - “I Was a Boat Person: Vietnamese Refugees Look Back:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQTviKM9Mx0>
 - d. KPBS How the Fall of Saigon made San Diego a refugee hub:
<https://www.kpbs.org/news/2015/apr/24/how-fall-saigon-made-san-diego-refugee-hub/>
5. The teacher leads a read aloud of the Quick Fact Sheet about the Vietnamese Americans in the U.S. Alternate choral reading – teacher reads one fact, the whole class reads the next fact, teacher walks around the room as students and teacher read the facts – Quick Fact Sheet attached.
 - a. Students draft a set of questions that they would like to learn more about the Vietnamese refugees based on the information provided. Prompting questions may

include: “What questions do you still have? Whose story is being told? Whose narrative is being left out?” The class compiles a list of shared questions.

6. The teacher leads a deeper discussion about the Vietnamese refugee experience in the U.S., focusing on the essential questions. The teacher shows the movie, *Journey from the Fall*, inspired by the true stories of Vietnamese refugees who fled their homeland after the fall of Saigon in 1975 – and those who were forced to stay behind. As students watch the movie, they should note the hardships and difficulties Vietnamese refugees experienced in their struggle for freedom. Students are also asked to reflect on how the film addresses how refugees are being portrayed in the context of racism and discrimination in the U.S.
 - a. Movie: *Journey from the Fall* (3 hours including bonus materials):
<http://www.journeyfromthefall.com/Home.aspx> . April 30, 1975 marked the end of Vietnam’s civil war and the beginning of the exodus of hundreds of thousands of refugees. Those who remained in Vietnam were imprisoned in communist re-education camps, others escaped by boat and embarked on the arduous ocean voyage in search for freedom. Thousands of lives were lost at sea. For the lucky few who found refuge in other countries were later reunited with their families.
7. After the movie, students engage in a Think, Write, Pair/Share followed by Group Share exercise, guided by the following questions:
 - a. How do Vietnamese Americans describe their refugee experience?
 - 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 U.S.?
 - 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, sufferings as they flee their homeland and seeking political and economic refuge in a foreign land.
- Being caught between two worlds, Vietnamese Americans are neither accepted by the country they left behind or America given their refugee status, a reminder of the war that America played a role in it.
- Vietnamese American community development over the past four decades – its resettlement from refugee camps to recognized ethnic enclaves throughout California and the U.S.

- The racial inequalities and discriminatory practices to 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 (CA Governor's remarks about nail salons as the center 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 the shape the diversity *our* America.
8. Students read various articles and books through the perspective of Vietnamese American refugees.
- a. Book: Being Vietnamese in America (Hay Song "My" Mot Cach Rat "Viet Nam") by Nguyen Ha Tran: http://www.fullerton.edu/nrcal/orderbooks_2020.php
 - b. Book: The Best We Could Do by Thi Bui: <https://www.amazon.com/Best-We-Could-Do-Illustrated/dp/1419718770>
 - c. Article : Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective by [Lan Duong](#), [Isabelle Thuy Pelaud](#). Journal of Asian American Studies: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/488126/pdf>
 - d. Article: Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship by Yên Lê Espiritu. Journal of Vietnamese Studies: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410?seq=1>
 - e. Article: April 30 by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://vietnguyen.info/2016/april-30>
 - f. Article: Our Vietnam War Never Ended by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://vietnguyen.info/2015/vietnam-war-never-ended>
 - g. Article: Author Viet Thanh Nguyen on the struggles of being a refugee in America by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://vietnguyen.info/2018/author-viet-thanh-nguyen-struggles-refugee-america>
 - 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://vietnguyen.info/2020/asian-americans-are-still-caught-in-the-trap-of-the-model-minority-stereotype-and-it-creates-inequality-for-all>
 - i. [Excerpt: Prologue and Introduction from *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* by Viet Thanh Nguyen](#)

As students read through these articles, students reflect in the following questions:

- Viet Thanh Nguyen's book *Nothing Ever Dies* begins with the statement that 'All wars are fought twice: the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory' – drawing from the assigned articles, how might this make sense for in different ways for the first generation of Vietnamese refugees and their second-generation Vietnamese American children?
- What is it like to be Vietnamese Americans today?
- How is the identity of Vietnamese Americans being shaped? What is visible and what is invisible?

9. Students conduct Oral Histories by interviewing Vietnamese refugees using the set of questions that the class has compiled in #4 above. Students can also personalize their project by considering how their personal and/or family stories connect to Vietnamese American experience and how the Vietnamese American experience connect to the larger historical narratives and how and why some narratives have been privileged over others. 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.

- a. See: REFUGENE Project "Record Family Stories" Storytelling Kit for oral history resources in partnership with the Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations (UNAVSA): <https://refugene.com/pages/refugenexunavsa>

Some important things to point out in the interviews:

- b. How has the refugee experience shaped the identity of Vietnamese Americans?
- c. What are the stories that were told and what remain invisible?
 - i. Why did some remain invisible? What conversation topics/themes were more difficult to talk about?
- d. What emotions and/or trauma arise from refugees in sharing their experiences?
- e. How do Vietnamese Americans see themselves in relation to other Asian American communities?
- f. 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, and Blacks protested against the heavy hand of racism in housing, employment, and educational opportunities). Following this civil rights movement, California’s diversity increased only after President Johnson’s immigration 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?; 2) In what directions is California growing in the twenty-first century?**

9. Assessment – To show evidence of what students have learned, students can choose one the following assignments:

- a. Write a 2-page essay answering each of the essential questions for this lesson using the evidence from the sources provided and the oral histories collected.
- b. In small groups (3-4 students), create a digital presentation answering the essential questions for this lesson using the evidence from the sources provided and the oral histories collected (photos, video, interviews).

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection: See Step 9 above.

Materials and Resources:

1. National Geographic resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the U.S.:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/resettling-vietnamese-refugees-united-states/>
2. The Vietnamese Refugees relive their escapes to Malaysia:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRSffhyYDM>
3. KPBS How the Fall of Saigon made San Diego a refugee hub:
<https://www.kpbs.org/news/2015/apr/24/how-fall-saigon-made-san-diego-refugee-hub/>

4. Movie *Journey from the Fall*: <http://www.journeyfromthefall.com/Home.aspx>
 - [Would also recommend *Bolinao 52* \(2008\) to highlight tragedy and travesty of the boat people experience; and/or *Daughter from Danang* \(2002\) to emphasize Amerasian experience](#)
5. Book: *Being Vietnamese in America* (Hay Song “My” Mot Cach Rat “Viet Nam”) by Nguyen Ha Tran: http://www.fullerton.edu/nrcal/orderbooks_2020.php
6. Book: *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui: <https://www.amazon.com/Best-We-Could-Do-Illustrated/dp/1419718770>
7. Article : *Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective* by Lan Duong, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud. *Journal of Asian American Studies*:
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/488126/pdf>
8. Article: *Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship* by Yên Lê Espiritu. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*:
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410?seq=1>
9. Article: *April 30* by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://vietnguyen.info/2016/april-30>
10. Article: *Our Vietnam War Never Ended* by Viet Thanh Nguyen:
<https://vietnguyen.info/2015/vietnam-war-never-ended>
11. Article: *Author Viet Thanh Nguyen on the struggles of being a refugee in America* by Viet Thanh Nguyen: <https://vietnguyen.info/2018/author-viet-thanh-nguyen-struggles-refugee-america>
12. 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://vietnguyen.info/2020/asian-americans-are-still-caught-in-the-trap-of-the-model-minority-stereotype-and-it-creates-inequality-for-all>

Supplemental Resources:

1. *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People* by Cargill and Huynh (stories directly from refugees)
 - Incorporated, Publishers, Mar 1, 2000
 - https://books.google.com/books/about/Voices_of_Vietnamese_Boat_People.html?id=z93VHlp4-S8C
2. *Hearts of Sorrow* by Freeman (stories directly from refugees)
 - Stanford University Press, Apr 1, 1991
 - <https://www.bookdepository.com/Hearts-Sorrow-James-M-Freeman/9780804718905>
3. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Le Thi Diem Thuy

- Knopf Doubleday Publishing, Apr 13, 2011
 - https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Gangster_We_Are_All_Looking_For.html?id=4KpUt3yl4W8C
4. Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics by Lisa Lowe
 - Duke University Press, Oct 1996
 - <https://www.dukeupress.edu/immigrant-acts>
 5. When Heaven and Earth Changed Places by Le Ly Hayslip
 - Plume, 1990
 - https://books.google.com/books/about/When_Heaven_and_Earth_Changed_Places.html?id=EY6CsmJeS_MC
 6. [*The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui](#)
 7. [*I Love You as for White People* by Lac Su](#)
 8. [*Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge\(es\)* by Yen Le Espiritu](#)
 9. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Quick Fact Sheet (below)

Think Write Pair/Share Group Share Handout (below)

Annotation Chart (below)

Quick Fact Sheet about Vietnamese Americans in the U.S.

- **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 groups after Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, and Indian Americans.
- The Vietnamese community in the United States was minimal until the South Vietnamese refugees arrived in the U.S. 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 U.S. involvement on the war in Vietnam.
- More than half of Vietnamese Americans reside in the two most populous states of California and Texas, primarily their large urban areas. Orange County, California is the home to the largest Vietnamese American 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 U.S.
- April 30, 1975 marked the fall of Saigon, which ended the Vietnam War, prompted the first large-scale wave of immigration; many with close ties to America or the South Vietnam government feared communist reprisals. Most of the first-wave immigrants were well-educated, financially comfortable, and proficient in English.
- From 1978 to 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, unsafe, crowded fishing boats. The second wave of refugees were generally lower socioeconomically, 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 Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines from which they entered 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.
- Emotional health was considered an issue common to many Vietnamese refugees, with war-related loss and the stress of adapting to a different culture leading to mental-health problems among refugees.
- Vietnamese Americans' income and social classes are diverse. Refugees arriving in the United States often had a lower socioeconomic standing in their home country and more difficulty integrating due to greater linguistic and cultural barriers.

- Vietnamese Americans have arrived in the U.S. primarily as refugees, with little or no money. While not as academically or financially accomplished collectively as East Asian counterparts, census data indicates that Vietnamese Americans are an upwardly-mobile group; their economic status improved substantially between 1989 and 1999.
- Most first-wave Vietnamese immigrants initially worked at low-paying jobs in small services or industries. Finding work was more difficult for second-wave and subsequent immigrants, due to their limited educational background and job skills.
- Young Vietnamese Americans adults are well educated, and often provide professional services. Since older Vietnamese Americans have difficulty interacting with the non-Vietnamese professional class, many Vietnamese Americans provide specialized professional services to fellow immigrants.
- Vietnamese Americans are among the most-assimilated immigrant groups in the U.S. Although their rates of cultural and economic assimilation were comparable to other groups (perhaps due to language differences between English and Vietnamese), their rates of civic assimilation were the highest of the large immigrant groups. As political refugees, Vietnamese Americans viewed their stay in the U.S. as permanent and became involved in the political process at a higher rate than other groups.

Source:

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnamese_Americans

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 which addresses 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. At the end, have the class share out their information, giving students a chance to present to their peers.

Annotation Chart

Symbol	Comment/Question/Response	Sample Language Support
?	Questions I have Confusing parts for me	The sentence, "... "is unclear because... 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 Key ideas expressed	One significant idea in this text is... One argument the author makes is that...
!	Shocking statements or parts Surprising details/claims	I was shocked to read that...(further explanation) The part about...made me feel...because...
0	Ideas/sections you connect with What this reminds you of	This section reminded me of... I can connect with what the author said because... This experience connects with my own experience in that...