

Teaching about the Vietnam War: Centering Southeast Asian Refugee Voices through Children’s Literature

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On January 17, 1989, a white man shot and killed five schoolchildren and wounded thirty-two others at the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California. Most victims were Cambodian and Vietnamese refugee children.¹

On September 6, 2016, President Barack Obama visited Laos and promised to help remove millions of unexploded US bombs that had been dropped over Laos several decades ago.²

In 2018, 126 Cambodian refugees were deported from the United States.³

In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Hmong American gymnast Sunisa Lee won a gold medal.⁴

Connecting the Dots

Although seemingly unrelated, these four news stories have one thing in common: they reflect the multifaceted legacies of the Vietnam War. First, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Lao, and Hmong people are in the United States because the United States went to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos for the Vietnam War.⁵ The war caused countless people in these countries to be displaced, and some of them were admitted to the United States as refugees. The 1989 Cleveland school shooting was related to this displacement. The white gunman, who reportedly hated Asian refugees, killed Southeast Asian refugee children in the schoolyard.⁶ Second, Obama’s 2016 pledge to clear unexploded US bombs from Laos also reveals the troubling legacy of the Vietnam War. During the war, US warplanes rained two million tons of bombs over Laos. One-third of them did not explode, and they have subsequently killed or maimed 50,000 to date. Today, the unexploded bombs still cause 50 annual casualties, 60 percent resulting in death, and 40 percent of the victims are children.⁷

Third, the deportation of Cambodian refugees is another tragic legacy of the war. Because they were forced to flee their war-torn countries, many Southeast Asian refugees settled in impoverished neighborhoods with high crime rates, and some refugee youth dropped out of uncaring schools and turned to gangs as a means of survival.⁸ In many cases, these circumstances eventually resulted in them being deported to their “native” countries, although many of them had no memory of their home countries because they had migrated to the United States as infants.⁹ Fourth, Sunisa Lee’s story also relates to the Vietnam War. The United States recruited Hmong people, an ethnic minority in Laos, to fight the communist forces on its behalf. When Laos fell to these communist forces, thousands of Hmong fled to neighboring Thailand, and some of them later resettled in the United States.¹⁰ Sunisa’s parents were children of these Hmong refugees.

Taken together, these four stories reveal the complex legacies of the Vietnam War. Yet many Americans may not connect the dots between them because of how the Vietnam War is taught and remembered.¹¹ In US collective memory and school lessons about the Vietnam War, the focus is on what happened to Americans, whereas Southeast Asian experiences are rarely considered. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, which represents the US collective memory of the war, lists and honors the names of the 58,000 Americans who were killed during the war. Yet the names of Southeast Asians who fought with American soldiers and were killed are nowhere to be found.¹² US textbooks also remain silent on the war’s effects on Southeast Asians. Although contemporary textbooks have moved away from glorifying combat and have, instead, focused more on soldiers’ suffering, their emphasis remains on US soldiers’ suffering, and this focus does not extend to soldiers or civilians of US allies or enemies.¹³ American experiences are also centered in popular movies, novels, and other media about the

Vietnam War.¹⁴ The message from the official curriculum and American public memory is then that the Vietnam War was only a moment of American heroic sacrifice and deep loss and was not a violent system that led to the deaths, displacements, and migration of Southeast Asians.

As an Asian American teacher educator and mother of schoolchildren in Georgia, I have seen many teachers teach a US-centered account of the war that neglects Southeast Asian experiences. Such teaching prevents students from acquiring a more nuanced, critical understanding of the war.¹⁵ With this belief, I have collaborated with local elementary school teachers to include Southeast Asian experiences in the Vietnam War lessons. In this article, two teachers' instructional approaches are presented.

Southeast Asian Experience of the Vietnam War

Before proceeding, the Vietnam War's history is briefly discussed.¹⁶ First, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had been under French colonial rule since the late 1800s. Then, Japan drove out France and occupied the region during World War II. When WWII ended with Japan's defeat, France sought to recolonize its former colonies, resulting in the First Indochina War (1946–1954). The United States sided with France in this war because it preferred French imperial rule to independent, communist governments in Southeast Asia.¹⁷ The war ended with a French defeat that temporarily divided Vietnam into north and south and led to the independence of Laos and Cambodia from France.

In this context, the United States began to more deeply intervene in the region to contain communism.¹⁸ By the 1960s, the United States entered a full-blown war against communist North Vietnamese forces and their allies in South Vietnam, which ended with a US defeat. Over 58,000 Americans and three million Vietnamese were killed, and twelve million Vietnamese became refugees.¹⁹ Worse even, the war had spread to neighboring Laos and Cambodia as Vietnamese communist forces had moved into the region.²⁰ The US bombings over Cambodia killed tens of thousands of Cambodians, fueling Cambodian civilians' support of the Khmer Rouge, a communist group that initiated a brutal genocide upon taking power in 1975.²¹ In Laos, two million tons of US bombs were dropped, which was equal to a planeload of bombs every eight minutes, twenty-four hours a day, for nine years. To hide these military actions from American public scrutiny, the United States recruited the Hmong, an ethnic minority in Laos, to fight the United States' "secret war" in Laos.²²

After the United States left the region in 1975, communist governments came to power in all three countries. People who had sided with the United States during the war or suffered under the new communist regimes

began to flee, and some of them were permitted to resettle in America.²³ The stories of 1.2 million Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian people who entered the United States as refugees reveal the complex legacies of the Vietnam War.²⁴

Centering Southeast Asian Stories through Children's Literature

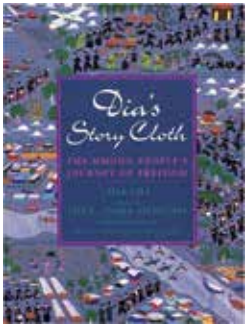
How can elementary teachers incorporate Southeast Asian experiences in lessons about the Vietnam War? Southeast Asian refugee children's literature—children's books about Southeast Asian refugees and their experiences of the war—can be a tool for broadening students' perspectives of the war.²⁵ Many scholars have noted the pedagogical value of using children's literature to teach about war.²⁶ Tadayuki Suzuki and his colleagues, for example, found that a critical selection and use of war children's literature can invite students into an honest exploration of war in all its complexities, from the cost in human lives to stories of resilience.²⁷ Ambika Gopalakrishnan also noted that children's literature about war can help students develop empathy, consider the difference (if any) between just and unjust war, and contemplate peaceful alternatives.²⁸

Ms. Lisa Lee and Ms. Anna Moon are elementary school teachers at metro Atlanta public schools. They use Southeast Asian refugee children's literature to center Southeast Asian experiences of the Vietnam War.²⁹ In Georgia, the Vietnam War can be found among fifth grade social studies standards related to the Cold War. Students are expected to

- a. Explain the origin and meaning of the term "Iron Curtain."
- b. Explain how the United States sought to stop the spread of communism through the Berlin airlift, the Korean War, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
- c. Identify Joseph McCarthy and Nikita Khrushchev.
- d. Discuss the importance of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War.³⁰

In teaching the importance of the Vietnam War, Ms. Lee and Ms. Moon use Southeast Asian refugee children's literature as a pedagogical tool to introduce students to the multiple perspectives crucial for moving beyond the America-centric view of the war. This practice aligns with the following skills listed in the C3 Framework: D2.His.4.3-5, "Explain why individuals and groups during the same historical period differed in their perspectives"; and D2.His.5.3-5, "Explain connections among historical contexts and people's perspectives at the time."³¹

Ms. Lee's Instruction



Ms. Lee is a Korean American teacher teaching at an elementary school in a largely white affluent neighborhood. She has taught elementary students for eight years. Mindful of the absence of Asian American history and other marginalized groups' histories in the official curriculum, she strives to bring awareness to silenced narratives through enacted lessons. In

teaching about the Vietnam War, she uses *Dia's Story Cloth*, a first-person narrative of the Hmong experience of the war.³² Dia Cha, the author and narrator of this picture book, uses a Hmong story cloth to illustrate her family's experience of the war. Dia grew up in Laos in the 1960s when the country was experiencing a civil war and the United States' "secret war." Her father was one of many Hmong men who were recruited by the United States to fight the communist forces during the Vietnam War. When the war ended with a communist victory, Dia's family fled to Thailand. After four years of waiting in a Thai refugee camp, Dia's family finally received permission from the US government to resettle in America.

Interactive Read-Aloud

Ms. Lee used this book for an interactive read-aloud after students had acquired content knowledge about the Vietnam War in previous lessons.³³ The class consisted of 20 white students, 2 African American students, and 1 Asian American student (of Chinese descent) with few receiving free or reduced lunch. Ms. Lee first briefly introduced the book's author and the history of the Hmong story cloth.³⁴ Then, she handed out photocopies of the story cloth included in the book and had students investigate what is going on in it. Ms. Lee said, "Let's see how our interpretations match or differ from what Dia tells through this book," and she began the read-aloud.

United States' "Secret War" in Laos. As a picture book written for young readers, the storyline did not have many historical details. Therefore, Ms. Lee frequently checked in with students to facilitate their understanding of the story. For example, Dia narrates the following:

Laos was caught in warfare. My country was divided in two: On one side, many Hmong men joined the loyalist army, which was supported by the American government. On the other side was the communist regime, which also recruited many Hmong men.

Here, Ms. Lee guided students to unpack which war Dia

was discussing, why the United States became entangled in the war, who were members of the loyalist army, and why the United States supported the loyalists by referring to the previous lesson on the United States' secret war in Laos during the Vietnam War.

On another page, Dia narrates, "Airplanes dropped bombs on the Hmong villages" but does not provide many historical details. Ms. Lee again paused and checked in with students to help them understand this part of the story by referring to the previous lesson on the American bombing over Laos. She also reminded students of the short video clip they had watched about unexploded bombs in Laos and their lingering effects today.³⁵

Hmong Refugee Struggles. When reading the passage on Dia's family's perilous journey escaping, Ms. Lee guided students to think about the human costs of the war and the United States' role in contributing to them. A few students identified a similar pattern between the Korean War, which they had learned about a month ago, and the Vietnam War: "It's like the Korean War! America was not a superhero coming to the rescue!" "We messed up! We bombed these countries and innocent people!" Toward the end of the book, Dia describes her experience of resettling in the United States.

I'd never been to school, so I had to start everything from scratch. They [Americans] wanted to put me in high school. But I didn't know anything. Then they wanted to put me in an adult school, but the teachers said I was too young.

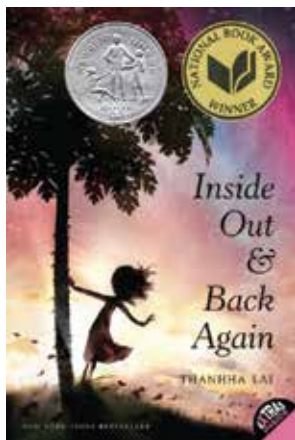
Reading the passage, students used historical empathy to understand Dia's struggles and resilience. Some shared the following: "If it was me, I would feel so frustrated!" "She overcame all this and became a researcher! That is amazing!"

Wrap-Up

Ms. Lee ended the lesson by explaining, "Hmong Americans like Dia Cha and Sunisa Lee are here because the United States waged war in Laos during the Vietnam War." She also underscored the complicated role the United States had played in the lives of Hmong people and the resilience of the Hmong in building new lives in America.

Ms. Moon's Instruction

Ms. Moon, a Chinese American teacher, works at a school comprised exclusively of Latinx and African American students. She has taught elementary students for nine years. She seeks to provide a socially just curriculum for her students. In teaching about the Vietnam War, Ms. Moon uses *Inside Out & Back Again*³⁶ to challenge the



dominant narrative that US wars are always inevitable and honorable and that the United States is always a beacon of freedom and justice. Written by Thanhha Lai, *Inside Out & Back Again* is a semi-autobiographical novel comprising short prose poems. This book provides Vietnamese experiences of the war through the voice of ten-year-old Hà. As the narrator in the book, Hà

describes her life in South Vietnam before the fall of Saigon, the difficult journey at sea as a boat person, and her new life in America as a refugee child.

Book Discussion

Ms. Moon led a book discussion about *Inside Out & Back Again* after students had learned about the Vietnam War in previous lessons. Because the book is novel-length, she assigned it as student independent reading four weeks before the lesson. She also provided a graphic organizer (see Pullout, Handout 1) to facilitate the students' independent reading. On the day of the book discussion, students were first encouraged to share their favorite poems from the book, and then, Ms. Moon led the book discussion.

Cause and Consequences of the War. First, Ms. Moon asked the students what the cause of the Vietnam War was according to the book. Several answered, "I couldn't find it," or "Hà didn't say anything about it." When probed to think about why the cause was not discussed, many concluded, like one student, that "Maybe Hà was too young" to understand the war's complex historical and political contexts. Next, Ms. Moon guided students to discuss how the war had affected Hà and her family. Building off their notes in the graphic organizers, students discussed the tragic loss of Vietnamese lives and their struggles to find refuge and build new lives in America.

South Vietnamese View of the United States. To discuss Vietnamese perspectives about the United States' role in the war, Ms. Moon had students read "American Address,"³⁷ a poem in the book, as a class. In this poem, Hà describes how her family moved into their first apartment in Alabama and had their first three months' rent paid by their American sponsor. Hà's oldest brother reminds the family this was a way for the US government "to ease the guilt of losing the war." Hà's mother immediately "clamps shut his mouth" and tells him to "be grateful" for the United States' generous support. Hà then looks around their government-funded home and is pleased with some of the donated household items but unhappy with others,

such as a stained mattress. Again, her mother told her to "be grateful," and Hà replies, "I'm trying."

By comparing the perspectives of Hà and her brother and mother, students identified the varied, conflicting, or mixed feelings that Vietnamese refugees had toward the United States. When probed to think about why they had these feelings, several pointed to the United States' complex roles in the war as one said, "Many Vietnamese died because of America, but then, America rescued the refugees!" Clearly, students recognized that, on the one hand, the United States' war in Vietnam produced the very conditions that forced many Vietnamese to flee their homeland; yet, on the other hand, the United States allowed many Vietnamese to find refuge in America.

US Response to Vietnamese Refugees. The next discussion was about the American reception of the Vietnamese refugees. By comparing how Hà's American neighbors, teachers, and classmates treated her and her family, a student concluded: "Some Americans were nice like Mrs. Washington, but others were racist like the bullies at school." Many students felt sorry that Hà had to hide and eat lunch in the bathroom to avoid her classmates' taunting. At the same time, they were impressed when Hà said "I am practicing to be seen!"³⁸ and fought back against bullies by practicing martial arts.

Troubling Stereotypes. Last, Ms. Moon asked students to carefully read "War and Peace,"³⁹ another poem in the book. In this poem, Hà writes about her American teacher who introduces her to the class by using photos representing Vietnam. One photo features "a burned, naked Vietnamese girl running down a dirt road," and another shows Vietnamese people "climbing, screaming, desperate to get on the last helicopter out of Saigon." Unhappy with the photos, Hà thinks to herself, "She [her teacher] should have shown something about papayas and Tết [the Vietnamese Lunar New Year holiday]."

In making sense of this poem, students discussed how photos like these can be problematic because they tell only one story about Vietnam that represents it as a place of horror while depicting the Vietnamese as victims who can be rescued only by the United States. One student agreed with Hà: "I would also not want my classmates to think about my home country only as a horrible place! Because it's not!"

Wrap-Up

In concluding the book discussion, Ms. Moon commended the students for their critical and nuanced understanding of the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese people, and the United States. She also encouraged them to demonstrate their newfound understanding by writing a journal entry (see Handout 2 in Pullout).

continued on page 17

Conclusion

Ms. Lee and Ms. Moon were not taught Asian American histories in their teacher education program or the schools they attended in rural and suburban Georgia. Their education in Asian American histories was developed later in life through independent study. Despite rarely having students of Southeast Asian heritage, both teachers believed learning about the Vietnam War through Southeast Asian perspectives is important for all students. As Ms. Lee put it, “an honest and inclusive history education is good and necessary for all students to become informed citizens.” Similarly, Ms. Moon believed in helping students “develop empathy for others and combat racism so that they can build a more peaceful and just world.”

Although the two teachers’ instructions were different in terms of the books used, there were some commonalities. First, both teachers used children’s literature after students acquired content knowledge about the Vietnam War. This seems essential because children’s literature tends to be short on detailed historical information. Second, both teachers guided students to note not only the suffering but also the resilience and agency of Southeast Asian refugees. This is important because students cannot fully grasp war without its atrocities, yet they also need to see the possibility of hope and historical agency of ordinary people in order not to stay with despair and inaction.⁴⁰ Third, both teachers encouraged students to move beyond a simplistic account of the Vietnam War by understanding complex roles the United States played in the lives of Southeast Asians as well as the diverse experiences and perspectives of Southeast Asian refugees regarding the war.

The practices described here can be applied to other texts. The Appendix (see Pullout) contains a list of suggested children’s books related to Southeast Asian refugees. I hope many teachers find Ms. Lee’s and Ms. Moon’s instructions helpful for reimagining how they teach about the Vietnam War. ■

Notes

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