

Major Topic: Southeast Asian Refugees in the U.S.

Content Area: Anthropology, Asian Studies, Asian American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Global Studies & Sociology

Grade Level: First-year undergraduate students

Time Period: 75 minutes per lesson with 3 lessons in total for 225 minutes

Unit Title: “From Judgement to Curiosity: Southeast Asian Refugees in the U.S”

- **Lesson One: Hmong Refugee’s Experiences in the US (Who are the Hmong?)**
- **Lesson Two: The US “Secret” War in Laos (Why are Hmong in the US today?)**
- **Lesson Three: Hmong Identities Today (How are Hmong working to rebuild their identities?)**

Unit Objective: The aim of the unit is to facilitate a process whereby students move from a position of judgement to curiosity about refugees in the US, with a particular focus on Hmong refugees from the US Secret War in Laos. Over the course of the unit, which includes three lessons, students will gradually gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural differences (i.e. intercultural competence). More specifically, students will:

- Learn about refugees and their experiences in the US
- Learn some of the histories/stories of certain groups of refugees from Southeast Asia in the US, with a particular focus on Hmong refugees
- Learn about some of the countries of Mainland Southeast Asia
- Learn about the current struggles and achievements of Hmong refugees in the US

Assessment: At different stages of the unit, the teacher will assess students’ changing ideas about the lesson material via small and large group discussions, and a final review of individual student’s written responses on the worksheet entitled “My ideas about refugees before and after...” (see Appendix A).

Materials Needed:

- Google Earth Map of Mainland Southeast Asia (link [here](#))
- Worksheet on “My ideas about refugees before and after...” (see Appendix A)
- Readings (2): *Southeast Asian Refugees / Asian Americans - Background Reading* (link [here](#); under “Support materials for teachers”) & Mary Louise Buley-Meissner. 2002. “The Spirit of a People: Hmong American Life Stories,” *Language Arts* 789(4):323-331 (link [here](#); also see attached pdf).
- Educators may also connect this unit to another resource from NIU’s CSEAS [Southeast Asia Crossroads Podcast Teacher Resources](#) (see “Tou SaiKo Lee: The Hmong American Experience”).

Documentary Film for Lesson One: “The Split Horn: Life of a Hmong Shaman in America” (Taggart Siegel, 2001, New York, NY: Filmmakers Library, 57 minutes; link [here](#)). Synopsis: The Split Horn is the sweeping story of a Hmong shaman and his family living in Appleton, Wisconsin. Documenting the 17-year journey of Paja Thao and his family from the mountains of Laos to the heartland of America, this poignant film shows a shaman's struggles to maintain his ancient traditions as his children embrace American culture.

Documentary Film for Lesson Two: “The Hmong and the Secret War” (Valley PBS, 2021; 57 minutes; link [here](#)). Synopsis: In 1961, four years before the Vietnam War, the CIA funded a Secret War in Laos. The Hmong became the CIA’s surrogate army, fighting and preventing Communism from consuming the country of Laos. The film explores questions about the Secret War in Laos during the Vietnam War and the circumstances that brought the Hmong to the US.

Film(s) for Lesson Three:

1. YouTube Video: Tou SaiK Lee, “Reclaiming cultural identity and language through hip hop (2021, TEDxMinneapolis, 15 minutes, link [here](#)). Synopsis: For generations, the Hmong people have embraced storytelling as a way of connecting original generations and youth. In this enriching talk, spoken word and hip hop artist Tou SaiK Lee merges poetry with history to teach about valuing cultural identity and shares how his coming-of-age experience provided a sense of belonging within his community.
2. Optional documentary: “Hmongstory 40 Full Documentary” (2016, 20 minutes, link [here](#)). Synopsis: A powerful documentary that provides an intimate closeup look into the efforts of the Hmongstory 40 Team and their three year journey of piecing together the Hmongstory 40 Exhibit which celebrates the 40th Anniversary of the exodus of the Hmong people from Laos and the Secret War, through the Thailand Refugee Camps and finally the story of how they have found new beginnings in California and American.

Teaching Procedures by Lesson Plan (in order from one to three):

Lesson One: Hmong Refugee’s Experiences in the US (Who are the Hmong?)

Activities:

1. Divide students into groups of three or four and have them collectively discuss and then individually complete the “before” section of their worksheets on “My ideas of refugees before and after”; then invite several groups to share their “before” ideas with the larger class. Compile a list of their ideas on the board.
2. Review conventional definitions of “refugees” (1951 Refugee Convention; link [here](#))
3. Introduce and discuss the short reading: *Southeast Asian Refugees / Asian Americans - Background Reading* (link [here](#); under “Support materials for teachers”).
4. Provide a brief overview of Mainland Southeast Asia, especially noting the countries relevant to Hmong refugees (see Google Earth Map of Mainland Southeast Asia; link [here](#)).

5. View all or part of the documentary: “The Split Horn: Life of a Hmong Shaman in America” (2001, 57 minutes; link [here](#))
6. Review the following discussion questions drawing on “The Split Horn” with the class:

Why did Hmong families such as that of Paja Thao resettle in the US? Where did they come from? How did they get here?

Why do you think the U.S. government created laws to allow so many Southeast Asian refugees (including Hmong) into the U.S.? What does this say about the responsibility that the U.S. might have toward people abroad who have been affected by U.S. foreign policies and actions?

What kinds of challenges did Paja Thao’s family face in creating a new life in the US? How did their experiences differ from one generation to the next? Consider that the film is narrated by Chai, Paja Thao’s 12 year-old daughter. Have any of you or your relatives or friends had a similar experience of trying to adapt to a new way of life here in the US?

How do the Hmong traditions of healing, funeral rites, and kinship featured in the film compare and contrast to your family’s traditions?

What kinds of challenges does the Hmong family face in trying to adapt their traditional Hmong practices to their new way of life in the US? How do they overcome these challenges? In other words, what kind of new Hmong American identity do they create? How does that identity connect to their past, present, and future as Hmong and American?

How does the film help to humanize or put a human face on Hmong refugees and their histories and struggles? In what ways does the film complicate and challenge stereotypes and misunderstandings about refugees in the US more broadly?

7. Summarize the content of the lesson; have students work in small groups to summarize what they learned from the lesson and then share their summaries with the larger class. Conclude by briefly introducing the focus of lesson two.

Lesson Two: The US “Secret” War in Laos (Why are Hmong in the US today?)

Activities:

1. Begin with a brief review of lesson one (Hmong Refugee’s Experiences in the US/Who are the Hmong?)
2. Pair students up and have them discuss and write down their thoughts on Hmong refugees and why they are in the US today. Afterwards, have some groups share their thoughts with the larger class.
3. View all or part of the documentary: “The Hmong and the Secret War” (2021, 57 minutes; link [here](#))

4. Introduce the following discussion questions drawing on “The Hmong and the Secret War” with the class:

What do we know about the US Secret War in Laos? How did it start? Who was involved?

What roles did Hmong play in the war? How were they impacted by the war?

Does the US have any responsibilities towards Hmong refugees? How can the US best fulfill those responsibilities?

5. Divide students into groups of three or four and have them collectively discuss their responses to the discussion questions. Afterwards, ask some groups to share their responses with the larger class.
6. Conclude by driving home the big ideas from today’s lesson and briefly introducing the main topic of lesson three.

Lesson Three: Hmong Identities Today (How are Hmong working to rebuild their identities?)

Activities:

1. Begin with brief reviews of lessons one (Hmong Refugee’s Experiences in the US/Who are the Hmong?) and two (The US “Secret” War in Laos/Why are Hmong in the US today?).
2. Introduce and discuss the reading by Mary Louise Buley-Meissner. 2002. “The Spirit of a People: Hmong American Life Stories” (link [here](#); also see attached pdf). If time, ask the students to reflect, discuss, and share their thoughts on the question of how researching life stories can empower and give a new sense of direction and purpose to young people, especially those from disenfranchised and marginalized groups.
3. Introduce [Mr. Tou SaiKo Lee](#) (Hmong hip hop and spoken word artist and educator) and watch: “Reclaiming cultural identity and language through hip hop (2021, TEDxMinneapolis, 15 minutes; link [here](#))
4. Review the following discussion questions drawing on “Reclaiming cultural identity...” with the class:

Where is Tou SaiKo originally from? How did he and his family end up in the US? What do we learn about his family history?

How does hip hop and spoken word poetry help Tou SaiKo reconnect with his Hmong identity?

How does hip hop and spoken word poetry help Tou SaiKo reconnect with other Hmong who are also struggling to connect with their cultural identity, heal from past trauma, and express their struggles and aspirations? How does hip hop and spoken word poetry help Tou SaiKo bridge disconnects between Hmong elders and young people? If there is time, listen to Tou SaiKo's 2014 song ["Generation after Generation."](#)

What kinds of experiences (good and bad) did Tou SaiKo have as a young child that spurred him to (re)connect with his Hmong culture and language?

How does his reunion with his beloved Grandmother figure into his experiences of reconnecting with Hmong identity and becoming a hip hop/spoken word artist and educator? What kinds of surprising connections does he find between his modern hop hop creations and his grandmother's traditional song poetry creations? How does he build on those connections in his artistic expressions and outreach work?

What does Tou SaiKo say about the history and power of hip hop more broadly, especially for disenfranchised and marginalized groups of people? How are Hmong and other Indigenous groups in the world using hip hop to maintain and revitalize their traditional languages and cultures?

What advice does Tou SaiKo give to young students, especially those who feel lost and disconnected from their native languages, cultures, communities, and elders? What value does he see in our mother tongues and cultures? What value do you see in your mother tongue(s) and culture(s)?

5. Divide students into groups of three or four and have them collectively discuss and then individually complete the "after" section of their worksheets on "My ideas of refugees before and after"; then invite some students to share their "after" ideas with the larger class.
6. Give students time on their own to review their responses to the "before" and "after" sections on their worksheets and then complete the third section (i.e. "My ideas about refugees have changed over the course of the unit as follows").
7. Have students share and discuss their responses to section three of the worksheet in groups of three or four. Then ask several groups to report back to the larger class on their smaller group discussions. Compile a list of the responses on the board.
8. Conclude with a brief recap of lesson three and the main points from the overall unit. Finally, ask the students to review and complete the fourth and final section of their worksheets (i.e. "Some further questions and concerns I have about refugees are the following:"). Ask some students to share their responses and compile a list of their questions and concerns on the board for everyone to see. Brainstorm with the students about different ways they might go about answering their questions or addressing their concerns about refugees.

Appendix A: Sample Worksheet on “My ideas about refugees before and after...”

<p>1. My ideas about refugees <u>before</u> completing this unit are as follows:</p>
<p>2. My ideas about refugees <u>after</u> completing this unit are as follows:</p>
<p>3. My ideas about refugees have <u>changed</u> over the course of this unit as follows:</p>
<p>4. Some <u>further questions and concerns</u> I have about refugees are the following:</p>