

**Seventh Grade Lesson on Southeast Asia**  
**By Sohyun An**

**SS7H3 Analyze continuity and change in Southern and Eastern Asia.**

- e. Explain the reasons for foreign involvement in Korea and Vietnam in terms of containment of communism.

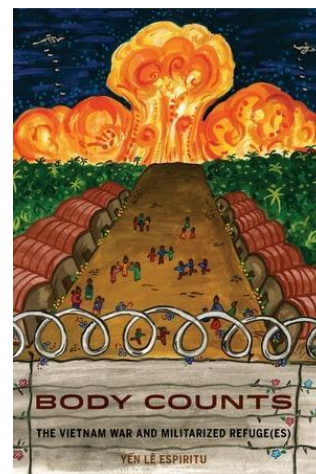
When students think about the Vietnam War, Korean War, or US wars in Asia in general, they don't think about how these wars were the larger structural forces behind Asian migration to the US. But history shows many Asians have migrated to the US as refugees, adoptees, and military spouses as well as immigrants, students, or laborers, largely because of wars. The Vietnam War, for example, caused countless death and destruction in Vietnam and neighboring countries including Laos and Cambodia. This devastation created a refugee crisis, forcing more than 1.2 million Southeast Asians to leave their homes and resettled in the United States.

In teaching about the Vietnam War, it is therefore important to include the stories of the Vietnam War from Southeast Asian refugee perspectives. If not, students would think the Vietnam War had nothing to do with Southeast Asian migration to the US, and such ahistorical thinking can lead to anti-Asian hate and discrimination. Common verbal attacks like “Go back to your country!”, discriminatory deportation policies, and hate crimes against Asian Americans all emerge from misconceptions that the U.S. has been nothing but a benevolent rescuer and good refuge for desperate Asians who want to flee from poverty and oppression in Asia.

This essay provides a brief history of the Vietnam War from Southeast Asian refugee perspectives and instructional suggestions and resources.

**Background Information**

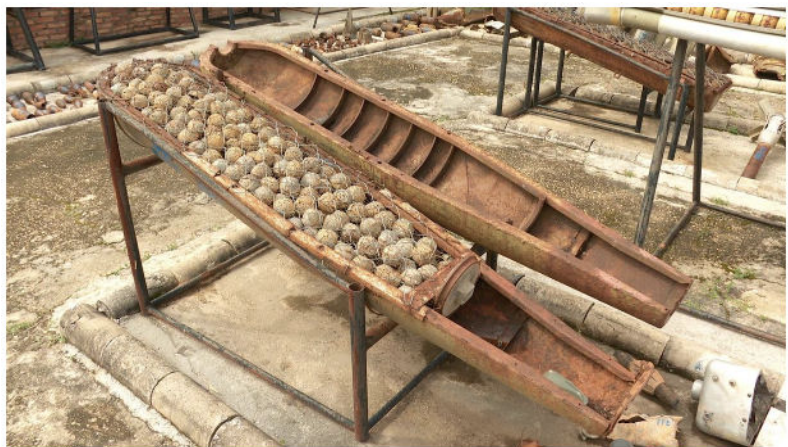
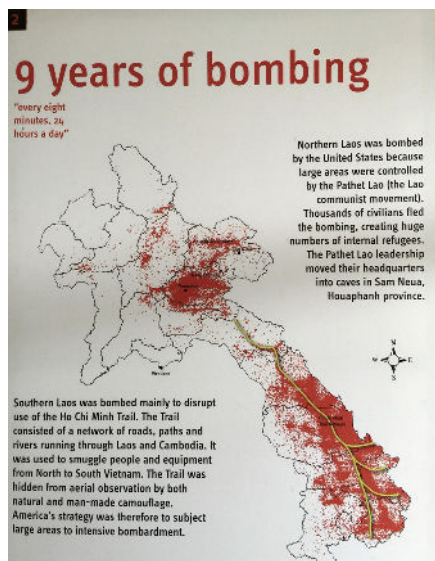
The roots of the Vietnam War originated in the late 1800s when Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were under French colonial rule. During WWII, Japan drove out France and occupied the region. When WWII ended with Japan's defeat, France sought to recolonize its former Southeast Asian subjects, resulting in the First Indochina War (1946–1954). In this war, the United States sided with France because it preferred French imperial rule to independent communist governments in Southeast Asia. After eight years of fighting, the First Indochina War ended with a French defeat. Laos and Cambodia gained independence from France, whereas Vietnam was temporarily divided into north and south.



In this context, the United States began to more deeply intervene in the region to prevent the spread of communism. 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 U.S. defeat. More than 58,000 Americans and three million Vietnamese lost their lives in the war, and 12 million Vietnamese became

refugees. Furthermore, most of Vietnam's infrastructure was destroyed, and its land and water were poisoned with defoliating chemicals.

Even worse, the Vietnam War spread to neighboring Laos and Cambodia as Vietnamese communist forces moved into those regions. U.S. bombings over Cambodia killed tens of thousands of Cambodians, fueling Cambodian civilian support of the Khmer Rouge, a communist group that initiated a brutal genocide upon taking power in 1975. In Laos, two million tons of U.S. bombs were dropped, which was equal to a planeload of bombs every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine years. To hide these military actions from public eyes and ears and to minimize American casualties, the United States recruited the Hmong, an ethnic minority in Laos, to fight the United States' secret war in Laos.



CBS/RANDY SCHMIDT

An unexploded U.S. cluster bomb -- one of millions in Laos -- is seen at an outdoor exhibit in Xieng Khouang.

When the United States withdrew from the region in 1975, communist governments had come to power in all three countries. People who sided with the United States during the war or suffered under the new communist regimes began to flee. Some were airlifted and taken to U.S. military bases in the Pacific for resettlement processing. Others fled on foot or by boat. Many died from drowning, shipwrecks, starvation, thirst, and violent pirate attacks. Those who survived the dangerous journey still had to endure poor conditions in refugee camps in neighboring countries, waiting with uncertainty and sometimes indefinitely, to be resettled in the United States or elsewhere.

Resettlement in the US also was not easy. A poll taken in 1975 showed that only 36% of Americans were in favor of accepting Southeast Asian refugees. Although some refugees were received warmly, many others experienced hostility and discrimination from their American neighbors, which even resulted in hate crimes such as the 1989 Cleveland Elementary



School shooting. A white gunman, who reportedly hated Asian refugees, killed Southeast Asian refugee children in the schoolyard. Deportation of Southeast Asian refugees also reveals the mixed reality.

While gratefully being permitted to resettle in the United States, many Southeast Asian refugee youth were subject to the same systematic marginalization as many other youths of color: failing schools, generational poverty, racial profiling, and mass incarceration. For the refugee youth who have applied for naturalized citizenship, this school-to-prison pipeline further extends to deportation. That is, deportation is mandatory for non-citizen refugees with any of a wide range of old criminal records, regardless of the unique circumstances of their cases.



The stories of 1.2 million Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian people who entered the United States as refugees and struggle to rebuild new lives reveal the complex legacies of U.S. war and military interventions in Southeast Asia.

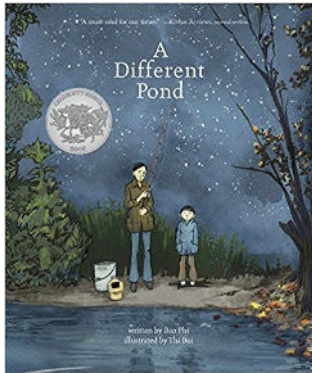
### **Instructional Suggestions**

Southeast Asian refugee children’s literature can be a great instructional tool. These books tell stories of the Vietnam War through Southeast Asian refugees’ experiences, naturally linking war and displacement. Recommended books and discussion questions are provided below. Have students read one or a few of these books and discuss what they read. Then, have them go deeper by doing research on varied and divergent experiences of Southeast Asian refugees. In doing so, make sure students to 1) understand how the Vietnam War led to Southeast Asian migration to the U.S., 2) identify complex roles that the United States played in the war and refugee crisis, 3) center Southeast Asian voices and experiences in understanding of the war and forced displacement, and 4) recognize the struggles and resilience of Southeast Asian migrant communities.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Who are the main characters and what happened to the main characters during the war, escape, and/or resettlement?
- What challenges did the main characters face and how did they navigate these challenges?
- What role did the United States play in the Vietnam War and the Southeast Asian refugee crisis?
- What did the main characters feel and think about the war, displacement, and the resettlement?
- What new understandings do you have about the Vietnam War, Southeast Asian migration, the United States, and Southeast Asian Americans?

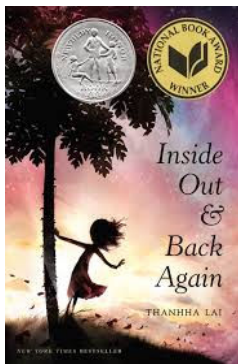
### Recommended Books for Inquiry



Bao Phi (2017). *A Different Pond*. Capstone.

**Storyline:** Bao, a young Vietnamese American boy, wakes up early in the morning to accompany his father who goes to fish for family dinner. While fishing, the father talks about his life in Vietnam and shares sad memories of his lost brother during the war.

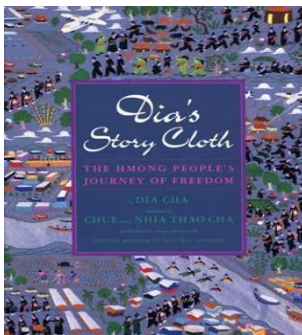
This book vividly describes a Vietnamese refugee family's struggle with poverty and their resilience. Yet the book is short on details about why the war happened and what role the United States played in the war. Students can use this book as a starter to go deeper into the Vietnam War legacies in terms of Vietnamese displacement and resettlement struggles.



Thanhha Lai (2013). *Inside Out & Back Again*. HarperCollins.

**Storyline:** Ten-year-old Hà and her family leave their home and become refugees at the end of the Vietnam War. They go through difficult journeys to America. After living in a refugee camp in Florida, they move to Alabama. There, she and her brothers and mom deal with their immersion in American culture and society in different ways.

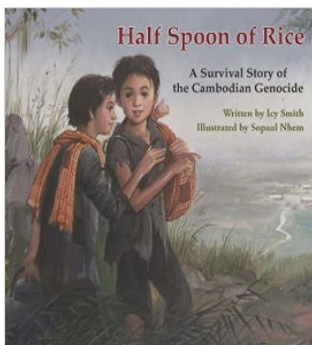
This semi-autobiographical novel provides Vietnamese experiences of the war through the voice of ten-year-old Hà. It greatly and vividly describes complex, divergent, diverse experiences of the refugees.



Dia Cha (1995). *Dia's Story Cloth*. Lee & Low Books.

**Storyline:** Hmong American Dia Cha tells her family story of peaceful living in Laos prior to the Vietnam War, wartime struggle, living in a Thailand refugee camp, and resettling in the US as refugees.

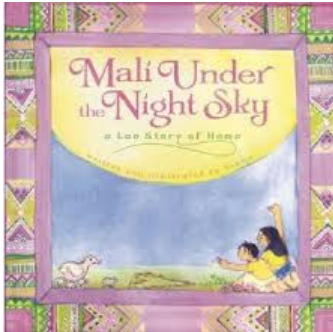
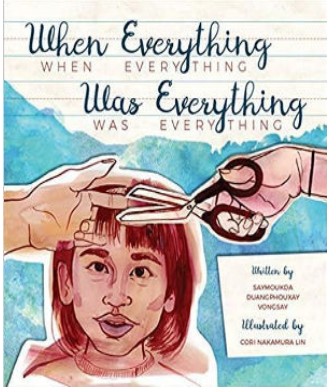
This book vividly tells a story of the US secret war in Laos and its legacies on Hmong refugee crisis, Hmong resettlement in the US, and Hmong resilience and agency. Students can use this book to go deeper into the diverse stories of Hmong people in the US.



Icy Smith (2010). *Half Spoon of Rice*. East West Discovery Press.

**Storyline:** Nine-year-old Nat and his family are forced to leave their home and to the labor camps when the Khmer Rouge takes over the country in 1975. There Nat is separated from his family and endures forced labors with other children. Later, Nat escapes to Thailand where he is reunited with his family. After many months in the refugee camp, Nat's family gets permission to resettle in the US.

This book vividly describes the tragic results of the war on Cambodian civilians. The author's note gives more detailed information on U.S.'s secret war in Cambodia and how the U.S. carpet bombings over Cambodia fueled Cambodian civilians' support for the Khmer Rouge.

	<p>Youme Landowne (2010). <i>Mali Under the Night Sky</i>. Cinco Puntos Press.</p> <p><b>Storyline:</b> Mali, a little Lao girl, enjoys her happy childhood in Laos until it is suddenly disrupted by the war. She and her family now must endure a perilous journey to cross the Mekong River and flee from the war.</p> <p>This book brings to light Lao experiences of the Vietnam War. Although the storyline does not provide historical contexts of the war, the end page includes information about the U.S.'s secret war in Laos. Students can use this book as a starter to research on the U.S.'s secret war in Laos and its legacy on the Lao refugee crisis.</p>
	<p>Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay (2018). <i>When Everything was Everything</i>. Full Circle Publishing</p> <p><b>Storyline:</b> A little girl from Laos shares her family's lives in Minnesota as a refugee family. She is raised on food stamps, continuously shuttled from one public housing address to the next, forced into ESL classes, and ridiculed by her peers. Yet she finds resilience and joy amid challenges.</p> <p>This book does not shy away from Lao refugee struggles with racism and poverty while at the same time underscoring refugee resilience. It is however short on details about the war itself. Students can pair this book with <i>Mali under the Night Sky</i> to connect the dots between the U.S.'s secret war in Laos and Lao migration to the US.</p>