

4.6.1 – Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees in Southern California
The Asian American Education Project

Grade Level	3-5
Lesson Overview	According to California History/Social Studies Standards, students in the third grade study the “arrival of immigrants, and the impact they have had in forming the character of our contemporary society.” Often, the histories of immigrants with European ancestry, with a particular emphasis on the Ellis Island Immigration Station, are centered while other immigrant communities and experiences are either underrepresented or wholly excluded. Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) communities have a long history of immigrating to the United States that varies across different ethnic groups within the APIDA community. For example, Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos settled in the United States in large numbers after the end of the Vietnam War as they tried to escape persecution and the devastating impacts of war. They faced many struggles resettling in the United States, and refugees from Vietnam specifically have a significant history in California. This lesson focuses on the resettlement experiences of Vietnamese refugees in Southern California and how they ultimately helped transform California into a hub for refugees.
Lesson Objectives	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Describe the resettlement experiences of Vietnamese refugees in Southern California ● Explain how Vietnamese refugees established community in Southern California

Lesson Implementation: This lesson can be completed in one instructional session or over a period of 1-2 weeks. Here are options for lesson implementation:

- One instructional session: Complete Activity 1 and Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions
- Two instructional sessions: Complete Activity 1, Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions, and one option from Activity 4
- One week: Complete Activity 1, Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions, one option from Activity 3, one option from Activity 4, one extension activity
- Two weeks: Complete all activities plus several additional options

Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees in Southern California Essay:

In the 1950s, North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. North Vietnam’s goal was to unite the two countries as a **communist** country. The United States was worried about communism so it joined the war to help South Vietnam. The United States sent hundreds of thousands of army troops to fight in Vietnam. This led to a very long and deadly war. The war is known as “The Vietnam War” in the U.S. and “The Resistance War Against the United States” or “The American War” in Vietnam.

In April 1975, North Vietnam took control of South Vietnam’s capital city, Saigon. (Today, it’s called Ho Chi Minh City.) This marked the end of the war. In the twenty years of war, millions of people had died. Many people had been injured or **displaced** because of the war too. After the war ended, the United States



quickly **evacuated** Vietnam. Many South Vietnamese wanted to escape the country too. They were afraid they would be punished by the new government for not supporting North Vietnam during the war.

In May 1975, U.S. President Gerald Ford signed a law that let **refugees** from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos come to the United States. The law also set aside money for a **resettlement** program for refugees. When refugees arrived in the United States, they were sent to different cities where they would be matched with **sponsors**. These sponsors helped them get jobs, find housing, and get used to life in their new home country. Refugees were sent to live in cities across the country on purpose. This was supposed to help with their **assimilation** and spread out the cost of resettlement.

The first wave of Vietnamese refugees who arrived in 1975 were rich and educated. Some were South Vietnamese government workers and leaders who the U.S. helped evacuate. The next wave of Vietnamese refugees came in the late 1970s. They were mostly from rural, poor, and less educated backgrounds. Many of them were forced to stay in refugee camps in other countries before they made it to the U.S. Some tried to flee on small boats and became known as the “boat people.” They suffered a lot at sea, and many people died trying to escape.

After the war ended, resettlement centers (also called refugee camps) were quickly set up. Camp Pendleton was the first refugee camp that opened for Southeast Asian refugees. The camp was located in San Diego, California. It was the only refugee camp in the western United States. Vietnamese refugees from the first wave were sent to Camp Pendleton.

Camp Pendleton was also known as “Tent City.” Tens of thousands of refugees lived there in cramped military tents. In six months, about 50,000 Vietnamese refugees passed through Camp Pendleton. Vietnamese refugees experienced many struggles including **culture shock**, **trauma**, and language barriers when they arrived. The U.S. Marines at the camp and other Vietnamese refugees provided some support. They served food, cared for the sick, and taught English. Refugees stayed there for about three months. Then, they would resettle with the help of the U.S. families that were sponsoring them.

Many Vietnamese refugees resettled in Southern California. The warm weather reminded them of Vietnam. Some moved to southern regions of San Diego, like Linda Vista and City Heights. Others moved north to Orange County and Los Angeles. Vietnamese refugees resettled across different states based on where they found sponsors and jobs. Many refugees resettled in other parts of the U.S., such as Orlando in Florida, Fort Smith in Arkansas, and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania.

At first, refugees had a hard time learning and getting used to the new culture. They survived by building community. They got jobs, became business owners, and bought homes. They created **ethnic enclaves** with their resources. Refugees who came to the U.S. later would move to these cities too. For some, it was easier to build their new lives around other refugees, who were similar to them.

For example, Little Saigon in Westminster, California is now the largest Vietnamese American community in the country. **Residents** are able to stay connected to their culture, find work, and give back to their community. In their community, they can find comfort and safety from racism and discrimination.

Little Saigon’s most famous **landmark** is Asian Garden Mall or Phước Lộc Thọ, which means “fortune, prosperity, and longevity.” It is the first and largest Vietnamese American shopping mall. It has many shops owned by Vietnamese Americans. It’s the site of many cultural and political events and a source of pride for the community.

Today, the Vietnamese American population continues to grow and thrive. There are many strong Vietnamese Americans communities across the country.

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Vocabulary:¹

- **Assimilation:** the process of fitting in or taking something in and making it part of the thing it has joined
- **Communism:** a social system or system of government in which property and goods are owned in common
- **Community:** a group of people with common interests, goals, experiences, and histories, especially when living together
- **Culture shock:** a sense of confusion and uncertainty or anxiety that may affect people exposed to a new culture or environment without proper preparation
- **Ethnic enclave:** a distinct territorial, cultural, or social group within a foreign place/community that supports a specific group of people
- **Evacuate:** to remove troops or people from a place of danger
- **Landmark:** a usually large object on land that is easy to see and can help a person find the way to a place near it; an important building or monument



- **Refugee:** a person who flees for safety especially to a foreign country
- **Resident:** a person who lives in a place
- **Resettlement:** a program or process of moving refugees into a new place to live
- **Sponsor:** one who takes responsibility for some other person or thing
- **Trauma:** severe mental or emotional stress

¹ Definitions adapted from Merriam Webster

Discussion Questions: (Suggested Time: 20 minutes)

1. What were some of the effects of the Vietnam War?
2. What brought Vietnamese refugees to the United States?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the different waves of refugees?
4. What is Camp Pendleton? Why is it important in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees?
5. Why did Vietnamese refugees settle in Southern California?
6. How did community support and ethnic enclaves help the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees?
7. What are some challenges refugees might face in their new countries?

Activity 1: Introduction to Vietnamese Refugees (Suggested Time: 10 minutes)

In this activity, students will learn about refugees and why many Vietnamese came to the United States.

1. Ask students: “Why do you think people come to the United States?”
2. Then, define the term “refugee” for students: “A refugee is a person who leaves their home country because they aren’t or don’t feel safe there.” Explain that refugees are different from immigrants: immigrants usually have more power over their decision to leave while refugees *have to leave* because they can’t live in their home country anymore. (If needed, play this educational video about refugees: <https://youtu.be/25bwiSikRsl>).
3. Have students discuss what they know about refugees and their experiences.
4. Tell students: “Today there are over 1.4 million Vietnamese Americans. But before 1975, there were fewer than 15,000 Vietnamese in the United States. Many Vietnamese refugees came to the United States because of the Vietnam War. Many Vietnamese Americans today are the children or relatives of these refugees.”
5. Show students a map of Vietnam. Show students some images of Vietnamese culture, traditions, and foods.
 - a. Ask students to share what they know about Vietnam, Vietnamese culture / traditions, or Vietnamese Americans.
 - i. Share some information about the items / traditions in the images you showed.
 - b. Tell students that Vietnamese refugees and immigrants brought their dishes to the U.S., opened up shops and businesses, and have found ways to keep their culture and traditions alive.
 - c. Tell them they will be learning more about Vietnamese refugees in the United States.

Activity 2: Camp Pendleton (Suggested Time: 40 minutes)



Students will learn about Camp Pendleton and how Vietnamese refugees lived there before being placed in other cities.

1. Have students read the essay. (Option: Create a slide deck with the essay content). Facilitate a discussion (see Discussion Questions).
2. Show students these two videos:
 - a. “Vietnam refugees arrive at Camp Pendleton in 1975”: <https://youtu.be/kobLi6p2XvI>
 - b. “Vietnam refugees remember Camp Pendleton’s ‘Tent City’ 45 years later”: <https://youtu.be/cv3elzi4jAs>
3. Facilitate a discussion about the videos:
 - a. What more did you learn from the videos? How did the images help you better understand what you read in the essay?
 - b. How did you feel hearing from actual Vietnamese refugees? How did it add to what you’ve learned so far about Vietnamese refugees?
 - c. What was life like at Camp Pendleton? How did the images and stories from the videos help you realize what life at the camp was like?
4. Have students complete the SIT (Surprising, Interesting, Troubling) strategy:
 - a. Ask students: What was something you found surprising, interesting, or troubling about the experiences of Vietnamese refugees?
 - b. Have students respond using sticky notes or [Jamboard](#).
 - c. Discuss students’ responses by comparing and contrasting responses.
5. Show students [photographs](#) of life at Camp Pendleton and read the captions. Have each student complete the following chart:

Describe one photograph that stood out to you.	
Explain why the photograph stood out to you.	
What does the photograph tell you about what life was like for the refugees at Camp Pendleton?	

6. Tell students that Camp Pendleton was a temporary stop for the Vietnamese refugees as they only stayed there until they were resettled in various U.S. cities. Have students complete a quickwrite describing how it would feel to be forced to leave your home and be uncertain about your future.

Activity 3: Little Saigon (Suggested Time per Option: 60 minutes)

Students will learn about Little Saigon and its significance for Vietnamese Americans.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. OPTION 1: Have students research Westminister’s Little Saigon and/or San Diego’s Little Saigon. Have students create a brochure including the following components:
 - a. Three historical dates and events



- b. Three statistics, including how many Vietnamese Americans are currently living in the area
 - c. At least one significant event that take place in the enclave
 - d. At least two landmarks (places to see) or activities (things to do)
 - e. At least two ways that the enclave contributes to the city and/or nation
2. OPTION 2: Take students on a field trip to Westminister’s Little Saigon and/or San Diego’s Little Saigon. Have students take pictures of at least three landmarks or placemarkers that sparked their interest. Have students create a map including major streets with the locations of their chosen landmarks. Have them research the history of the landmarks. Have them research the significance of the landmarks to both the Vietnamese American community and to the mainstream American community. Have students pretend to be a tour guide and prepare a script to describe the landmarks to others. Option: Have students create videos about their landmarks.
3. OPTION 3: Have students research Westminister’s Little Saigon and San Diego’s Little Saigon. Have students complete a Venn diagram to compare and contrast both areas. Ask students the following questions:
 - a. In what ways are the two enclaves similar? What accounts for the similarities?
 - b. In what ways are the two enclaves different? What accounts for the differences?
 - c. How do these two enclaves support the Vietnamese American community?
 - d. How do these two enclaves support the city and/or nation?

Activity 4: The Lives of Vietnamese Refugees in Southern California (Suggested Time per Option: 30 minutes)

Students will show what they have learned about the lives of Vietnamese refugees in Southern California in an activity.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. OPTION 1: Have students create and present a visual timeline with images and captions describing the experience of Vietnamese refugees in Southern California to include the Vietnam War, evacuation, Camp Pendleton, and resettlement.
2. OPTION 2: Have students write an explanatory essay answering the following questions:
 - a. What was life like for Vietnamese refugees?
 - b. What types of support from their community helped refugees rebuild their lives in California?
3. OPTION 3: Have students interview a Vietnamese American business owner from Westminister’s Little Saigon or San Diego’s Little Saigon. Have students write a news article about the business owner’s history, experience, and contribution to society.

Extension Activities (Suggested Time per Option: 20-40 minutes)

1. Have students read and listen to one or more of the [stories](#) from PBS’s Story Project: Voices of the Vietnamese Refugee Experience. Have students write a reflection given these prompts: What more did you learn about the Vietnamese refugee experience? What questions do you have about the experience?



2. Have students learn about the experiences of Vietnamese refugees in other U.S. resettlement camps. (Besides Camp Pendleton, the United States opened three other resettlement camps: Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and Fort Chaffee in Arkansas. These camps supported between 10,000 and 50,000 refugees and helped them transition into their new lives.) Have students compare and contrast the experiences of these refugees to those in California.
3. Have students learn about the resettlement experiences of other Southeast Asian refugees (i.e. Cambodians, Laotian, and Hmong). Facilitate a discussion given the following prompts: What was resettlement like for each group? What are the different challenges each group faced? How and why were they similar? How and why were they different?
4. Read aloud or show a video of a read-aloud of [A Different Pond by Bao Phi](#). Facilitate a discussion given the following prompts: What does this story reveal about the experiences of Vietnamese refugees? What is the significance of the title? What did you learn about Vietnamese culture?
5. Have students browse through the [Little Saigon Stories book](#). Have them interview a Vietnamese American and create a page for them including a picture and a quote.
6. Have students research Frank Jao, the pioneer businessman who developed and owned Asian Garden Mall. Have students research Tri Ta, the first Vietnamese American mayor of Westminster, California. Model creating a poster of them. Then, have students research a Vietnamese American pioneer. Create a class book of Vietnamese American profiles.
7. Show students the video about [Little Saigon in San Diego](#). Facilitate a discussion given the following prompts: Why are ethnic enclaves like Little Saigon important to the Vietnamese American community? Why did the Vietnamese community in San Diego think it was important to be recognized as a cultural district? How has the formation of Little Saigon as an ethnic enclave contributed to San Diego?

Further Information:

Note: These lessons will enhance the teacher's knowledge. They are not designed for 3rd-5th graders.

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "Asian Americans Serving and Fighting in the Vietnam War":

<https://asianamericanedu.org/asian-americans-serving-and-fighting-in-vietnam-war.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "Asian American Veterans and the Anti-War Movement":

<https://asianamericanedu.org/asian-american-veterans-and-anti-war-movement.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "Southeast Asian Refugees":

<https://asianamericanedu.org/southeast-asian-refugees.html>

