



TOPIC: Asian Americans Serving and Fighting in the Vietnam War

GRADES: 9-12

BACKGROUND ESSAY

Among the 8.7 million Americans who served in the Vietnam War (1955 to 1975)—referred to by the Vietnamese as the American War—approximately 35,000 were Asian American. The war, between the communist North Vietnam and anti-communist South Vietnam, was the fourth U.S. military conflict in Asia within the past sixty years. Like many young Americans who served in Vietnam, Asian Americans were drawn to the military by patriotism and desire to leave home. However, Asian Americans who served in the Vietnam War faced racial challenges that made their experiences unique and, in many cases, traumatic.

Within the U.S. military, Asian Americans faced direct and indirect racism from fellow military officers. Unlike previous wars where Asian Americans fought primarily in segregated combat units, most in the Vietnam War served in integrated units where they were often the only Asian Americans in their unit. One exception was Team Hawaii, a unit of Asian American servicemen who “could pass for Vietnamese” and were sent on long-range reconnaissance missions.

Asian Americans were often used as examples of what the enemy Vietnamese looked like during training, and mistaken for “enemy casualties” in Vietnam. Even Team Hawaii was misidentified by other Americans as Vietnamese and nearly killed by friendly fire. Asian American women who served in the military not only faced racism, but also sexism and unwelcome flirtation from fellow officers. Asian Americans developed strategies such as wearing

their uniforms at all times in order to be recognized as American military personnel, as well as created alliances with other servicemen of color who were also experiencing racism.

The struggles that Asian Americans faced in the Vietnam War, however, were not just external and did not end after the war. Many Asian Americans, like other Vietnam War veterans, suffered high rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Post-war studies indicate that PTSD in Asian Americans was made worse by race-related stressors. Confronted by the Vietnamese they were fighting and saving from Communism, Asian Americans had to consider their own identities, as Americans of Asian descent.

Asian Americans serving in Vietnam often recognized a connection between their situations and those of the Vietnamese people whom they were fighting. What did it mean that they looked like and were often seen as “the foreign enemy” despite their upbringing in the United States? This internal struggle was also compounded by the fact that Asian Americans, like many other Americans, began to wonder why they were part of the war in the first place.

VOCABULARY

- **Integrated**: Describes a group or space in which people of two or more races mix.
- **Segregated**: Describes a group or space in which people are separated according to their race.
- **Platoon**: a small, self-contained group of soldiers.
- **Sexism**: discrimination based on gender and often applied to women.
- **Racial or ethnic slur**: an insult based on someone’s race, ethnicity, or nationality; for example, “**gook**” is an insult referring to a foreign person of Asian descent; originated as a wartime term used against people of Filipino, Korean, or Vietnamese descent or “**chink**,” a slur first used against Chinese workers in the U.S. and later applied to persons of Asian ancestry.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were some of the specific challenges that Asian Americans serving in Vietnam faced because of their racial identities and their Asian heritage?
2. What were some of the unique experiences of Asian American women in the military, especially compared to their male counterparts?
3. What effect and impact did racism have on Asian American soldiers during the Vietnam War?

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: How Racism is Accentuated in Wars

During World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, Asian Americans fought for the U.S. military. For these servicemen and women, this role sometimes meant negotiating their own Asian heritage and appearance while subject to racism from fellow American military

servicemen.

First, have students conduct research on racial discrimination and mistreatment for Asian American soldiers during one of the following: World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War. If students need resources to begin their research, direct them to the following:

- The Go For Broke National Education Center covers the history of Japanese Americans who served in segregated units in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War: http://www.goforbroke.org/learn/history/military_units/index.php
- For information on Asian Americans serving in the Vietnam War, see: Chao, Julie. "Asian American vets can't forget Vietnam War racism." *The San Francisco Chronicle*, April 2, 1999. <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Asian-American-vets-can-t-forget-Vietnam-War-3090545.php>
- For a historical overview of Asian Americans in the Korean War, go to The Korean War 60th Anniversary: <http://www.koreanwar60.com/asian-americans-korean-war-0/>

Provide the following chart for students to write down key facts and examples from their research. Then, ask them to prepare 2-3 open-ended discussion questions to ask classmates. Good discussion questions have more than one answer and no single "right" way of responding.

Focus War:	
Important Historical Facts:	Key Examples of Discrimination:
Discuss Questions for Seminar:	Notes During Seminar:

Once they have had time to prepare notes and questions, tell students that they will be participating in a Socratic Seminar. In a Socratic Seminar, students are principally responsible for leading the dialogue. Sitting in a circle, have students pose questions and follow-up questions to each other; students also draw on prepared research and examples. Teachers can find more information on organizing a Socratic Seminar here:

"Teaching Strategy: Socratic Seminar." Facing History and Ourselves. <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar>

Here are some questions that can kick off the Seminar:

- What effect and impact did racism have on Asian American soldiers?
- What were examples of the racially-based mistreatment that Asian Americans experienced serving in the military? Who was being mistreated by whom?
- How can we address racism in institutions such as the military?

Activity 2: PTSD and Mental Health

In 2011, Danny Chen, a 19-year-old Chinese American private in the U.S. Army, died by suicide after being physically and verbally abused by his fellow soldiers. The only Asian American person in his unit, Private Chen was called a “gook” and “chink,” made to do rigorous exercises, and pelted with stones while crawling over gravel. Eight soldiers were charged with crimes related to his death. Chen’s death later led to legislation that protects servicemen from being harassed, bullied, or hazed while in the line of duty.

Part 1: Research

Have students research the case of Private Danny Chen. Ask the students to answer these questions in their research:

- Why do you imagine Danny Chen joined the military instead of going to college?
- Why do you think his fellow soldiers harassed and abused him?
- What crimes were the soldiers charged with in connection to Danny Chen’s death?
- Are there other cases involving people of color related to hazing and bullying in the U.S. military?
- What parallels or contrasts do you see between Private Danny Chen's experiences in the Army and the experiences of students at your school?

Once students have sufficient time for research, re-group as a whole class, and debrief their findings. Ask for students to share their responses to questions and, if needed, to fill in any gaps in their knowledge.

Part 2: Role Play

Tell the students that they will act in a role-play in which they work in groups to take on different perspectives in the case of Danny Chen.

The premise of the role-play is: A community meeting is being held in Manhattan’s Chinatown to discuss the results of the Danny Chen trial. Moreover, various stakeholders will brainstorm what can be done to reduce anti-Asian hazing in the military and within other institutions, like schools and athletics.

Split students into equally-sized groups. Assign them to one of the following roles:

- Danny Chen’s family
- Representatives from the U.S. Army’s public relations team
- Chinatown anti-racism organization
- U.S. military veterans

- The accused soldiers' families and friends
- A group of teenagers who want to stop bullying in schools

Tell students to get together in their role-play groups. To prepare for the meeting, they should answer these questions based on their assigned perspective:

- What are your feelings about the results of the Danny Chen trial? Was the decision of the jury just or unjust? Explain!
- Who is responsible for making institutions like the military safer places for people of color and other minorities?
- What should be done to address hazing incidents like Danny Chen's when they occur? What specific suggestions can you make?
- What changes should be made to make the military and schools safer places?

Reconvene as a whole class. Create a "town-hall" style set-up in your class, with a podium for speakers and a place where the teacher can serve as a "mayor" to facilitate the conversation and take notes. Each group should select 1-2 students to give 2-3 minute testimonies from their perspective. As they are listening, direct the students to take notes on each role player's arguments and feelings.

After time for testimonies, move the desks so that all of the students are facing each other. At this time, each group has time to rebut, challenge, or comment on the testimonies.

Remind students that, though it is a role play, they should still not interrupt and listen thoughtfully. Give each group 2-3 minutes each to present their counter perspectives (new members of the group should speak).

Finally, allow a "free" debate for 10-15 minutes, in which anyone can respond, agree or disagree, or offer further commentary, especially on what can be done to address hazing within the military and other institutions. The "mayor" should jot down some of the constructive solutions offered on the board or piece of chart paper.

Then, stop the community meeting. Read back some of the larger arguments and solutions suggested by the various role players. Then, as a way of wrapping up, ask students to step out of their role, and debrief the process. On an index card, they can jot down their thoughts: What did they like about the role play? What was challenging about it? What did you take away from the process of participating in it?

As they walk out the door, the teacher should collect these cards and review them for feedback.

Activity 3: Reflecting on Your Own Actions

In the documentary, translator Alex Fabros describes an interaction with a captured Vietnamese soldier. The encounter shows an internal conflict regarding both his identity and purpose during

the war. Fabros reflects on his experiences in Vietnam: “I asked him in Vietnamese, ‘Why are you fighting us?’ He looks right at me, right in my eyes. ‘Why are you here? This is my country. Why are you here?’ I think right at that moment I realized that, ‘Okay, Alex, why are you here?’”

- Have students do a short free-write about a moment where they reflected on an action that resulted in a change in their lives.
- Discuss ways in which past actions that we regret can sometimes lead to important changes in our lives.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Ishizuka, Karen. “Looking Like the Enemy: Political Identity & the Vietnam War.” *Pacific Council*, May 7, 2019.
<https://www.pacificcouncil.org/newsroom/looking-enemy-political-identity-vietnam-war>
- Loo, Chalsa M. (1994). “PTSD Among Ethnic Minority Veterans.” *U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs*, 2007.
https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/type/ethnic_minority_vets.asp



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