



IMMIGRANT  
HISTORY  
INITIATIVE

K-5 LESSON PLAN RESOURCE  
*for parents & teachers*



# A DIFFERENT POND

## HISTORY GUIDE

This resource is designed for use alongside Capstone Publishing's "A Different Pond Reader's Guide" ([available here](#)), which provides discussion questions and activity ideas.

This historical summary fills in the gaps to Bao Phi's [A Different Pond](#), providing historical context for many of the clues left in the book's beautiful narrative. It provides a brief introduction of the Vietnam War and the lasting effects of the war on refugee families.

## **WHAT WAR CAUSED THE FAMILY IN A DIFFERENT POND TO LEAVE VIETNAM?**

The Vietnam War, also known as the "Resistance War against Americans" amongst the Vietnamese, lasted from the 1950s to the 1970s and affected many countries in Southeast Asia. Millions of people died during the war, and millions more became **refugees** who needed to flee the war-torn region. Refugees are people who are forced to leave their home due to disasters, such as a war or earthquake, or due to violence and unfair treatment.



## **WHY TEACH ABOUT WAR TO CHILDREN?**

### **WAR IS PART OF THE STORY.**

It is impossible to fully understand A Different Pond without understanding the family as refugees created by the war in Vietnam. We cannot fully answer the "why" about many parts of the story without discussing the war, such as what happened to the father's brother, why the family is impoverished, and why the family left Vietnam at all.

### **CHILDREN CAN FEEL THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA.**

From a young age, babies and children can notice and feel the effects of trauma, whether caused by war or by other hardship. We can equip our children to better cope with such experiences by deliberately and thoughtfully discussing difficult concepts together.

### **LEARNING HISTORY CAN HELP US CREATE A BRIGHTER, MORE EMPATHETIC, AND PEACEFUL FUTURE.**

## WHAT LED TO THE WAR IN VIETNAM?

In the mid-1800s, France **colonized** Vietnam. A country **colonizes** another country when it sends people to live there and take control over the government. However, after World War II, Vietnam was able to gain independence in 1945. After becoming independent, it established a **communist** government.

**Communism** is a form of government where property is owned by the state, emphasizing equal distribution of resources amongst citizens. America is a **capitalist** country. **Capitalism** is a system where private organizations and individuals own their own property. Resources are not equally divided, and economic activity is driven by competition.

Communist and capitalist countries began to compete for political power globally. As a result, the United States hoped to keep Southeast Asian countries from becoming communist. When a competing democratic government was set up in South Vietnam, the U.S. decided to support South Vietnam against the communist North Vietnam regime.



## WHAT DOES MONEY HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia was not only political. The region had rich economic resources, including rubber, tin, oil, and others. The U.S. government feared that if relations broke down with Vietnam because it was communist, it might lose access to these important natural resources.

## WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE WAR?

The war was mainly funded by major political powers, including the U.S. and South Korea for South Vietnam, and China and the Soviet Union for North Vietnam. Outside involvement and support drove the violence to continue for decades, devastating living conditions in Vietnam, and polluting or destroying much of the country's water, air, land and infrastructure.

Because of its proximity to Vietnam and its valuable routes to South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia also became battlegrounds during the war. The U.S. secretly launched massive bombing raids in Cambodia and Laos, resulting in huge casualties.

During the war, over three million people died, many of whom were civilians in Southeast Asia. In 1973, the U.S. withdrew its troops due to heavy losses and anti-war sentiment at home. In April 1975, North Vietnam seized control of Saigon ("The Fall of Saigon"), renamed it Ho Chi Minh City, and the country became reunified under communist rule.



## WHY DID REFUGEES LIKE THE FAMILY IN A DIFFERENT POND FLEE SOUTHEAST ASIA?

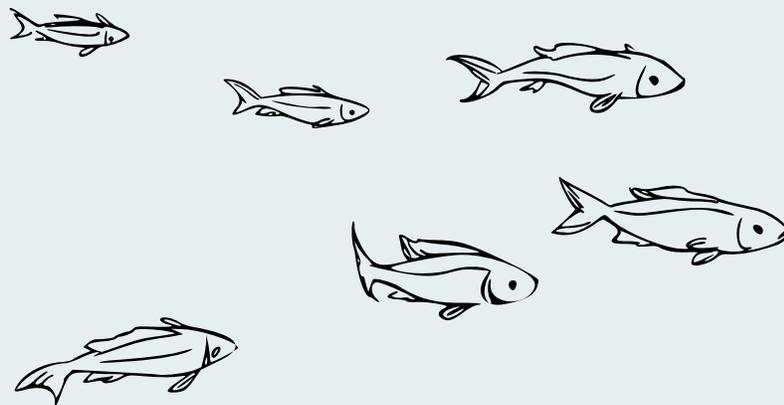
Many individuals and families left Southeast Asia in order to avoid **political persecution** or flee the devastating effects of the war on the land and infrastructure of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. **Political persecution** occurs when someone is targeted and hurt because of their political beliefs. For example, South Vietnamese who fought with U.S. troops feared that they may be targeted by the communist government.

## WHAT HAPPENED TO REFUGEES AFTER THEY LEFT SOUTHEAST ASIA?

Most people fled the country either by plane or ship. Unfortunately, many people died on these boats before reaching land, including from pirate attacks, drowning, or starvation.

The majority of refugees from Southeast Asia went to the U.S. Some Americans felt guilty about the human toll caused by U.S. involvement in the war, causing the U.S. to take in larger numbers of refugees. However, other Americans were unwelcoming or openly hostile to refugees, with some studies at the time saying more than half of Americans were opposed to accepting refugees. Refugees were often referred to as “boat people” and viewed as an economic burden and a reminder of the war that the Americans lost.

In the U.S., refugee families experienced difficulties in re-settling and adjusting. Many of them came to the U.S. penniless, often becoming stuck in cycles of poverty and forced to work multiple jobs to survive, such as the father in [A Different Pond](#). They also suffered from the effects of **trauma**, including **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. Experiencing long periods of stress and anxiety can have long-lasting impacts on mental and physical health. In [A Different Pond](#), activities like fishing helped the family recover from hardship and form strong bonds together.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What kinds of challenges do you think refugees have to face after moving to a new country? In A Different Pond, the boy's classmates made fun of his father's English. How can we help people **empathize** with the hardships of others?
- 2 Is anyone in your family an immigrant? Where did they immigrate from? Have they ever talked about what it was like to adjust to a new country?
- 3 When the father takes his son fishing, he briefly mentions that his brother didn't come back from the war. How do you think the war impacted family relationships?
- 4 There are still many refugees today, including from countries where the U.S. has fought wars, such as Afghanistan. What similarities do you see between the struggles of Vietnamese refugees and Afghan refugees?
- 5 After reading the story, what meaning do you take from the title of the book, "A Different Pond"? What do you think the author wants us to think about, and why do you think the story ends with the boy thinking about "fish in faraway ponds"?



# FURTHER RESOURCES

## FOR EDUCATORS

[Body Counts](#) by Yen Le Espiritu (book), University of California Press.

[Hmong Means Free](#) by Sucheng Chan (book), Temple University Press.

"The Experience of Vietnamese Refugee Children in the United States," by Min Zhou & Carl L. Bankston, III, *Urban Diversity Series No. 111*, [available here](#).

"Vietnam War," History.com, [available here](#).

"I Was A Boat Person: Vietnamese Refugees Look Back" (video), Al Jazeera, [available here](#).

## FOR STUDENTS

Children's Books:

- *Wishes* by Muon Thi Van: A family's difficult and powerful journey to pack up what they can carry and to leave their world behind
- *The Paper Boat: A Refugee Story* by Thao Lam: A wordless story of one family's escape from Vietnam
- *The Doll* by Nhung Tran Davies: Strangers greet a refugee family at an airport, and one of them gives the little girl a doll. Decades later, that girl is grown up and she can welcome a new group of refugees.
- *Adrift at Sea: A Vietnamese Boy's Story of Survival* by Tuan Ho & Marsha Skrypuch: The dramatic true story of a family dodging the bullets of Vietnam's military police to board a refugee boat

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