



## Oral Histories of Migration: Asian Americans in North Carolina

<b>Grade Level</b>	7 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grades
<b>Duration</b>	1-3 days
<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify key reasons why people immigrate to United States</li><li>• Understand the history of Asian migration to the United States</li><li>• Recognize Asian American leaders in business, government, and culture</li><li>• Understand the changes occurring in North Carolina and United States from these immigrants bringing their traditions and cultures</li><li>• Analyze oral histories as a primary source, with their advantages and limitations</li></ul>
<b>NCSCOS Essential Standards</b>	Social Studies  7.H.1.3, 7.H.2.3, 7.G.1.2, 7.C&G.1.4  8.H.1.3, 8.H.1.5, 8.H.2.1, 8.H.3.1, 8.H.3.3, 8.C.1.2

### Lesson

This lesson can be adapted to your class's needs.

1. Begin by assessing what students know about immigration.
  - a. For example, has anyone ever moved from one place to another? Has anyone moved from one state to another? Has anyone moved from one country to another?
  - b. In the United States, unless your family is Native American, your family immigrated here. Some people chose to immigrate, some were forced or kidnapped (as was the case for enslaved Africans brought to America).
  - c. Celebrate any students who are from a different country and consider asking them to share later in the activity.
2. Introduce students to the broad strokes of American immigration policy towards Asian immigration from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
  - a. Before airplanes, when people traveled by ship, of course it was easiest for Asians to travel to the West Coast. Workers travelled from Asia to the US, with large numbers coming starting in



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the 1850s to California. They worked in the newly discovered gold mines around San Francisco (in fact, one of the Chinese names for San Francisco is Old Gold Mountain (旧金山, Jiu Jīn Shān). They also worked in agriculture and the garment industry, and Chinese labor was crucial for building the railroad across the American West and connecting it to railroads from the East Coast. The money that Asian laborers earned in this work would pay off the people or companies that brought them to America or would be sent back to their families in Asia (where many countries were in economic and political crises because of expanding European colonialism).

- b. Other American workers were unhappy about Chinese workers coming to the United States, both because of negative cultural stereotypes they had about Asian people and because of competition for work. They pressured the government to make laws limiting Asian immigration. These started as state laws, but the movement grew into the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. (Although the law specifically used the word “China,” some of it was limited to China and other parts applied to all Asians. There were some exceptions, for example for the Philippines, which was a US colony.)
- c. In 1922, the US Supreme Court showed that race was central to the US government approach to immigration at the time, and that people of Asian race faced discrimination. A Japanese immigrant man named Takao Ozawa had graduated from high school and college in California, had raised his children in the United States speaking English, and had been living in the United States and its territories for over 20 years. He asked to become a US citizen, but the Supreme Court said he could not—no matter how much he had culturally become American—because of his Asian race. This was just one of many race-based and xenophobic (means “afraid of outsiders”) policies in the US at the time. Another key restriction was the Immigration Act of 1924, which seriously limited any immigration from Asia or from other countries perceived as poor or not culturally like America.
- d. From 1882 to 1965, it was really quite hard for people to migrate from Asia to the US, and not just because of the distance or the money. American policies made it difficult for anyone who arrived in a ship on the West Coast to be allowed into the country. Most who did come (at least until the 1940s) passed through Angel Island, an immigration station in San Francisco Bay (like Ellis Island was an immigration station in New York, but with different policies for Asian immigrants). They had to prove that they had family already in America if they were to be let in—but the tests to prove that they were related to family in America were strange and arbitrary, and designed to keep folks out (even people who truly were family members of American citizens).
- e. In 1965, Congress passed a new law to change the immigration system in America, and that is the basis for our laws today. It made immigration from Asia much more possible and removed race-based restrictions on immigrants from Asian countries. The priorities for immigration under this law were family reunification (75 percent), employment (20 percent), and refugees (5 percent).
- f. In the 1970s, after America was involved in military conflicts in Southeast Asia (not just the Vietnam War, but also dropping many bombs in the countries of Cambodia and Laos to target the people that the US thought were enemies during the Vietnam War), many people from Southeast Asia fled to the United States—including North Carolina—as refugees, because their home countries were no longer safe for them.
- g. Today, Asian Americans are the fastest growing immigrant population in the United States. Within the Asian American community, the largest groups are Indian-Americans, Chinese-



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Americans, Filipino-Americans, and Vietnamese-Americans. North Carolina is 3% Asian American.

3. Brainstorm the reasons for Asians to migrate to the US.
  - a. Ask your students if they can think of reasons why people would move to the US permanently.
    - i. If possible, pose the questions to students in an open-ended way before providing further information about reasons for migration from Asia to the USA.
    - ii. The three leading ways that Asians migrate to the United States are as students, as workers, or as refugees. (Additionally, many people come here because they have family members who came before in one of those three categories.)
      - If students are not familiar with the idea of “refugees”, explain that the countries around the world recognized this category from the middle of the twentieth century—seeing that some situations were so horrible that people needed to be able to leave them. For example, international definitions of refugee were influenced by the experience of victims of World War I in the Ottoman Empire and then the Jews under Nazi Germany.
    - iii. Many Asian Americans have come to the US initially for studies, and then made a life in America. One of the reasons why many Americans have a stereotype of Asian Americans as being smart and studious is because so many of their families came to the US for education and highly value academic achievement.
    - iv. Asian Americans have come to work in America in many different sectors. No longer confined to traditional industries like hard labor and the food sector (as they were a century ago), Asian Americans are now prominent in finance, in tech, and in cultural industries.
    - v. Since the 1970s, many people from Southeast Asia specifically have fled to the US as refugees. One of the primary reasons they fled was from conflicts in which America was involved (e.g., the Vietnam War, the carpet-bombing of Cambodia and Laos). Some of them were from families who had worked with America during those wars, and their lives became too dangerous after the American armed forces left. Others were simply victims of terrible circumstances after conflict took over their countries. One of the leading reasons for refugees to come to America today is for religious liberty—the same reason that some ancestors of the Founding Fathers migrated to America in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries!
  - b. Discuss how these reasons are similar to or different from other racial and ethnic communities
    - i. Remind students that many of the laws that impacted Asian migration also limited migration from Africa and other parts of the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
    - ii. (Perhaps in connection with the list of prominent Asian Americans below) remind students of other leading American immigrants or descendants of immigrants who came for the same reasons, e.g., President Barack Obama’s father came to America as a student (from Kenya to the University of Hawai’i); First Lady Melania Trump immigrated to America as a worker (from Slovenia to work as a model); and Gloria Estefan came to America as a refugee (fleeing Cuba).
    - iii. Unlike immigrants to American from Europe and Africa, most of whom came before 1960, most immigration from Asia to the United States has been after 1965.
    - iv. Although many Asians faced very harsh working conditions upon arriving in the United States, especially the Chinese workers who came in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they



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did not face the system of slavery that oppressed early generations of African Americans.

c. Make the reasons for migration concrete by thinking about prominent Asian Americans and their reasons for coming to America.

- i. If possible, have the students brainstorm famous Asian Americans and look up why their families came to the US.
- ii. This may be difficult, because many prominent Asian Americans today have been in the US for several generations, so they are descended from people with different reasons for migration.

iii. If useful, work from this list of prominent Asian Americans:

### *Business:*

- **Amar Bose** (founder of the Bose headphone company) – his father was a refugee from India to Pennsylvania in the 1930s
- **Da Won Chang and Jin Sook Chang** (founders of Forever21 clothing brand) – came from South Korea to California to work
- **Indra Nooyi** (chairwoman of PepsiCo 2006-2018, one of the world's most powerful women) – came from India to get a business degree in Connecticut
- **Sundar Pichai** (chairman of Alphabet / Google) – came from India to get an engineering degree in California
- **Eric Yuan** (founder and CEO of Zoom) – came from China to California to work

### *Government:*

- **Shyamala Gopalan** (mother of **Vice-President Kamala Harris**) – came from India to California to study advanced biomedicine
- **Elaine Chao** (Secretary of Transportation under Donald Trump) – her parents fled from China to Taiwan as refugees, and then she along with her family moved to New York for business
- **Nikki Haley** (former governor of South Carolina and US Ambassador to the UN) – her parents moved from India to Canada and then South Carolina for work

### *Culture:*

- **Brenda Song** (actress on the *Suite Life of Zach & Cody*) – her family were refugees from Thailand and Laos
- **Phillip Lim** (fashion designer) – came from Cambodia to America as a refugee
- **Kelly Marie Tran** (actress in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*) – her parents came from Vietnam to America as refugees



## Activities

### One-day Activity:

Listen to and reflect on oral histories with Asian migrants to the United States

**Xiong Lor** (<https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28280/rec/7>), talking about his immigration from Laos to America

- Listen to 00:10-00:47 and 4:45-6:20 and 7:25-8:25 (edited together as xiong\_lor\_SOHP.mp3)
- Think about how immigration is not always directly to the US—especially for refugees. Often they have to travel through other countries before arriving in the United States. Also, once immigrants arrive in the United States, they sometimes move from one state to another. What would it feel like to go through so many countries or cities before settling down? How would your life change if you knew you were moving in a few months?
- Reflect on the struggles that Xiong Lor talks about for his family, for example learning to speak English at school. Listen to his English now. Can you tell that he is an immigrant, or does he sound like a North Carolinian? What do we think about the ability of immigrants to adapt to America?

**Pai Lee** (<https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28570/rec/9>), talking about her immigration from the Laos to America as a refugee

- Listen to 15:36-18:28 (edited as pai\_lee\_SOHP.mp3)
- \*\*\*Note: this oral history was conducted through a family translator. The interviewer would ask a question, which Pai Lee's daughter would translate into Hmong; Pai Lee would answer; then the translator would provide the answer in English. If you are worried about your students making fun of Hmong when they hear it, we are also providing an mp3 file of just the English question and answer (edited as pai\_lee\_SOHP\_without\_hmong.mp3)
- Think about the kind of experiences that refugees flee in their home countries—what makes them refugees. If this happened in your home community, what would you take with you when you fled? How much could you carry with you if you had to run away to safety on foot?

**Cynthia Consing** (<https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28274/rec/3>), talking about her immigration from the Phillippines to America to work as a nurse

- Listen to 12:27-13:57 and 23:30-24:15 (edited together as cynthia\_consing\_SOHP.mp3)
- Think about how Asians who migrate to the US for work and the high standards they face in order to be able to work here. Cynthia Consing had to take many different tests to be able to work as a nurse in America (an English language test, a nursing skills test, plus more tests when she arrived). How are these requirements different than the requirements for immigrants in the past? How do these requirements still make immigrants for work different from Americans working in the United States?
- Remember the other costs that Cynthia Consing lists for working in the United States. Are these similar to or different from Asian immigrants who came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to work on the West Coast? (Costs of travel, costs of visa, costs of passport, etc.)
- Cynthia Consing talks about a “nursing shortage” in America—the United States did not have enough nurses for its population, so it allowed in immigrants who could fill that need in our society. The American president at that time, George H.W. Bush, created a special program for immigrants in the field of nursing. How can immigrants help the American economy and society?



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**Dorothy Dai** (pending library deposit), talking about her parents meeting in Taiwan and moving to America together

- Listen to 13:29-15:40 (edited as dorothy\_dai\_SOHP.mp3)
- Think about what you would do if you moved to a new country and didn't yet know the language. How would you make friends? How would you learn about local culture? What kind of job would you do?

**Ngoc Nguyen** (<https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28253/rec/1>), talking about her family coming to America from Vietnam

- Listen to 1:20-5:15 (edited as ngoc\_nguyen\_SOHP.mp3)
- Think about how the different reasons for coming can be intertwined (study/refugee; study/work; work/refugee); Ngoc Nguyen's father came as a student, but the rest of her family came to America as refugees because they were fleeing war and conflict in Vietnam. Her father started with one purpose in America, but when circumstances in his home country changed, his purpose of being in America also changed. How easy or hard is it for immigrants to predict what their future will be when they first come to America? Can they know for sure whether they will stay or go back to their country of origin?
- Ngoc Nguyen says her "parents actually don't like to talk about" their process of immigration, and especially the time in the refugee camp. Refugee camps are often very difficult places to live, and people in refugee camps are often suffering similarly to the suffering in the places they fled from. When we hear that her parents "don't like to talk about" some parts of the past, how does that change what we think of oral histories as a primary source?

### For all the oral histories

- What impressions do we get about reasons to move to America?
- How should we evaluate these oral histories as primary sources for history? Are they very reliable, because they come straight from the people who experienced it? Are they unreliable, because the people might not feel comfortable telling everything for the library collection or because they might not remember perfectly? How is this kind of primary source different from, for example, a newspaper article or a diary entry?

### Multi-day Activity:

Listen to oral histories of Asian migrants to the United States, and make your own oral histories about moving

For the first day, listen to the oral histories from the Southern Mix collection, as above.

For a take-home activity, ask each student to interview someone for about five minutes about a move. This does not need to be a move between countries (although it can be!); it could be a move between states, counties, or even between houses. They should ask some of the following questions:

- First, just tell me the story of the move in your own words.
- Why did you move from one place to another?
- What about your life changed when you moved? Was it easy to settle into the new place?
- How did your community change when you moved?
- What were the biggest challenges of moving?



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The next class meeting, ask students to pair up and talk about their interviews. Then ask for the student who interviewed the shortest move and the student who interviewed the longest move to present to the class, and compare and contrast these two cases.

In addition to analyzing the content of these “mini oral histories,” do not forget to analyze these oral histories as primary sources. Are the stories that students received different depending on whether the move happened a long time or a short time before the interview? Are the stories different depending on whether the informant was happy or sad about the move? If the student interviewed a family member, would the stories have been different if the informant was being interviewed by someone from outside the family? Would the stories be different if the informant was being interviewed by someone from outside the community? These questions will help students better understand how we should approach primary sources in social studies.

### Resources

#### Resources from UNC-Chapel Hill:

Carolina Navigators has [208 different culture kits](#) that can be loaned to your school, including one on [Asian American and Pacific Islander heritage](#) and many on individual Asian countries. They also have lesson plans and multimedia that can be used for teaching.

UNC-Chapel Hill has recently launched an [Asian American Center](#) to support its fastest-growing minority community

The Carolina Population Center has the [Carolina Demography project](#), producing data about the population of North Carolina. You can see some of their blog posts about immigrants and Asian Americans in [this overview](#) and [this entry on urban populations](#).

The [Southern Mix collection](#) of Asian American voices is part of the Southern Oral History Project.

The Carolina Asia Center has [Book Sets](#) that can be loaned out to classrooms.

#### Information on Asian Immigration to the United States:

[Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts](#)- a brief overview by the US Department of State

[Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation](#)- has curricular materials and lesson plans to teach students at various levels about this important site for Asian immigration to the US

[How Southeast Asian American refugees helped shape America’s resettlement system](#)- News coverage from 2020 including interviews with experts

[The University of Texas at Austin Immigration History Program](#)- has great teaching resources and information on the history of immigration to the United States, including a special track on Asian immigration

[Karen Refugees](#)- Information about Karen Refugees told by Karen Women

#### Information on Asian American communities in North Carolina:

[Transplanting Traditions](#)- Information about Karen Farm in Chapel Hill. NC



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[Thingyan in High Point, NC](#)- Videos of Water Festival in High Point, NC

[Dragon Boat Festival in Cary](#)- Information on Dragon Boat Festival in Cary

[North Carolina Asian Americans Together](#) is a political advocacy organization for Asian Americans in the state, which also has useful information about this population in North Carolina