

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #3: Coming to Terms: Stories of Southeast Asian Political Refugees

Oral History
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Okay. Well, it's ... it's interesting to note that with, uh, that if ... if we historicize, uh, Vietnamese independence movements, whether Communist, Nationalist, um, before American involvement, um, really escalates, starting in 1945, uh, the start of the Cold War, that, uh, the Vietnamese, um, were fighting for their independence, and this is a whole different take on even World War II, where, uh, in the U.S., we're taught the French and, um, the U.S. are our allies, and the Germans are the evil ones, the Japanese are ... are the Axis of Evil, as to use current rhetoric, but they were literally called the "Axis," of course: the Italians, the rhe ... um, I'm sorry, the Italians, the Germans and the Japanese, um, but today ... uh, well, I'm sorry, but in Asia, uh, what's interesting is that the Japanese have, what they call, the Co-Prosperity Sphere, which swept across Asia. Uh, the French were actually colonists, uh, colonialists—they colonized Vietnam, and, uh, Laos and Cambodia. Um, to the Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, the French were villains, they were oppressors, they've rules these three countries. And so, the Japanese actually, um - not to laud them as heroes, but they offered an alternative, which ... which was for, uh, Asian countries to unit against European Colonial powers. And so, um, the French actually, during World War II, were oppressors of the Vietnamese. They rules Vietnam. And what's also fascinating to note, which I think many Americans don't bring up, is that between 1945 and 1954, or the First Indochina War, um, which precedes what we call the Vietnam War here in the U.S., is, uh, where the French tried to retake Vietnam. Uh, the Japanese, of course, were defeated, and, uh, and bombed in 1945, leaving Vietnam open to declare its independence, and so, the French tried to recolonize, uh, Vietnam, and, uh, the U.S. actually gave \$2 billion to the French to support that recolonize effort. So, what's very fascinating to note is then all of a sudden the U.S. suddenly sides with South Vietnam to fight for democracy and freedom against Communism when, since 1945, they have given \$2 billion between '45 and '54 to, uh, the French. So, I think if we then bracket, uh, the Vietnam War, uh, from the American historical perspective, as just one phase, and we change it ... shift it towards Vietnam's perspective, the U.S. has a very mixed history, uh, with Vietnam. Uh, on the one hand, they're purportedly fighting for Vietnam's



independence and democracy. On the other hand, they ... they were, uh, one of the largest funders to, uh, basically back French colonialism. *[Laughs]* So, I think, um, if ... if Americans knew more about that, it would start to change the way they ... they look at, uh, the Vietnam War, not to, uh, heroicize the Japanese or demonize the U.S., but I think it paints a more complex picture of Cold War movements, um, uh, liberation and independence movements on the parts of Asian countries seeking to break the yoke of European colonialism. I mean, we have to remember, the British had India at that time, during World War II—the French had Indochina, um, the Dutch had Indonesia—so, Europe was all over Asia, and ruled Asia, while at the same time during World War II, fighting for the independence of the French from, um, German occupation, uh, helping to liberate Jews. So, what does that say? Um, I don't know, and, as a historian, I think with each passing day, the more I learn, the more I teach on these topics, the more confused I mean. And maybe the confusion is actually positive, because it will always lead to more curiosity, and that's what I really hope that ... that, uh, folks who talk about the Vietnam War and Vietnamese-Americans, and Vietnam as a country, take from all this, is to always be curious about it, and never really think that you have the single answer or the single historical perspective. There's an infinite number of possibilities of how we can represent history, and I think, especially, as a historian, uh, and as a Museum Exhibit such as this, uh, brings to light is that history is not the past. History, embedded in the word history, is "story." It's a story about the past, but no one can ever go back in time to the past, I mean, unless we invent a time machine. So, as historians, as, uh, uh, museum curators, um, it's the important job of representing different perspectives, but it's also being aware that you can't represent every perspective, and that the perspectives we chose to represent only represent a small fraction of what's out there. So, I think what's important is that anyone who looks at a museum exhibit, or reads a historical account, in their head, they're processing it. They're forming their own history, no matter what that will happen. They'll have their own judgements.

