

Literature Connections to Asia
Exploring Thailand and Vietnam through Literature

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Summary:

This project is focused on four novels set in Asia. These novels can be used as either read-alouds (which will be done in a 6th grade classroom) or as literature circle books. Two of the books are set in Thailand and two are set in Vietnam.

Silk Umbrellas, by Carolyn Marsden is a novel about a young Thai girl, Noi who wants to paint silk umbrellas like her grandmother. She has artistic skill and in the end is able to take over for her grandmother's painting of silk umbrellas instead of working in a radio factory like her older sister.

In The Breath of the Dragon, by Gail Giles, Malila wakes one morning to discover that her "criminal" father has been killed by the police. She lives with her grandmother for several years until her mother can afford to send for her from the United States where she moved after her husband was killed. She learns to appreciate Thai culture from her grandmother during her youth.

Water Buffalo Days and The Land I Lost, by Huynh Quang Nhuong, are stories of the adventures of a boy growing up in Vietnam. The companion novels includes short stories about the daily life of a boy and his family on a hamlet.

Activities to accompany the reading of these books include vocabulary and discussion questions.

Grade Level:

This project is appropriate for grades 3-6.

Key (Essential) Questions:

1. What is life in rural Thailand like?
2. What is life in rural Vietnam like?
3. What types of handicrafts are there in Thailand and Vietnam?
4. What are the people like in Thailand and Vietnam?

Background Notes:

These stories depict several families in Thailand and Vietnam. I believe I can enhance the images of these people through stories of my experiences in Thailand and Vietnam. I will also be able to share pictures and items (handicrafts, etc.) from my trip to help illustrate items the book discusses.

Standards:*Ohio Academic Content Standards- English Language Arts*

1. Define the meaning of unknown words by using context clues and the author's use of definition, restatement and example.
2. Make inferences based on implicit information in texts, and provide justifications for those inferences.
3. Locate important details about a topic, using different sources of information, including books, magazines, newspapers and online resources.
4. Summarize main ideas and supporting details.
5. Explain how a character's thoughts, words and actions reveal his or her motivations.
6. Identify the features of setting and explain their importance in literary text.

Ohio Academic Content Standards – Social Studies

1. Use coordinate of latitude and longitude to locate points on a world map.
2. Identify goods and services that are imported and exported and explain how this trade makes countries interdependent.

Objectives:

1. Students will develop an awareness of Thai daily life and culture.
2. Students will develop an awareness of rural Vietnamese daily life and culture.
3. Students will gain a geographic understanding of Asia.
4. Students will broaden their vocabulary.

Materials:

Water Buffalo Days, by Huynh Quang Nhuong

The Land I Lost, by Huynh Quang Nhuong

The Breath of the Dragon, by Gail Giles

Silk Umbrellas, by Carolyn Marsden

Discussion Questions for novels

Vocabulary photograph pages (chula, ka dom, kasalong, kome, melia noi, mangosteen, monks, rambutan, samlaw, san phra phum, silk umbrellas)

Postcards for vocabulary (rice farming, water buffalo, Loy Krathong, Sonkran, monks, silk umbrellas)

Souvenirs from Thailand and Vietnam (water buffalo statue, spirit house, rattan ball, kome, silk umbrella, plastic rambutan and mangosteen, samlaw toy, rice hat)

Strategies:

At the sixth grade level, these books make excellent read alouds for a unit of study on Asia. Previewing the vocabulary will assist the students in understanding the novels as they are read aloud. While listening, students can also ask questions for clarification of the elements of the books they do not understand. In addition to the materials provided, anecdotal stories will be included in the delivery of instruction.

Assessment:

The students will be assessed on participation with the classroom discussions. The students will assess the unit to help make improvements for future years.

Follow-Up Activities:

Web Searches for Thailand and Vietnam – and eventually a webpage with photos from the Fulbright trip in 2004.

Additional Resources:

Ohio Department of Education Academic Content Standards

<http://www.harperchildrens.com/schoolhouse>

<http://www2.ignatius.edu/faculty/turner/Galleries.htm>

<http://www.gailgiles.com>

Vocabulary Pages – photographs by Sara Resek

Postcards from Thailand and Vietnam

Susan Schamay – 3rd Grade Teacher, Florida

Thailand Books

Pre-reading activities

- A. Find Thailand on the map. Find Bangkok.
- B. Discuss the fact that Thailand was once called Siam. Ask if the name Siam brings anything to mind. Ex: Siamese cat, Siamese twins, the musical “The King and I,” the singing cats in “Lady and the Tramp.”
- C. Discuss Thailand's religion (predominately Buddhist) and type of rule. (Monarchy-ruled by a King who inherits the throne.)
- D. Discuss types of traditions in America that would seem odd to a girl from Thailand. (Santa Claus—fat man wearing red comes down a chimney in the dark of night to leave presents for children that please him with good behavior. Children leaving cookies or other snacks for Santa is especially important, so that later the leaving of food for the Chao Thi can be related. Also bring up Halloween’s trick or treat tradition so that it can be related to the water throwing activities during the holiday of Songkran.)
- E. Discuss the difficulties of growing up feeling like an outsider. What kind of things can make a person feel like an outsider? (Being poor, not having the “in” clothes, having a parent in legal trouble, not being society’s idea of attractive, belonging to an “odd” religion, a member of a minority race, not speaking English, etc.)

Breath of the Dragon by Gail Giles

Discussion Questions – <http://www.gailgiles.com>

Chapter One

1. What sound awakens Malila? Why do you think a policeman is talking with Malila’s mother? What clues do you have that Malila’s father death was not an accident or from natural causes?
2. Why does Malila not know her grandmother very well? How does Grandmother feel about this?
3. What does Grandmother say to prepare Malila that her life may be very different from now on?

Chapter Two

1. Where has Malila’s mother gone?
2. Name the things that have changed for Malila. Would these things frighten a five year old? How does Malila cope with these changes?
3. The river will be a continuing symbol in the book. What do you think the river is meant to symbolize. (Think about the river always moving, changing every day.)

Chapter Three

1. What present does Grandmother give Malila? Why is this particular gift show Grandmother's wisdom?
2. What kind of endings does Malila give all of Grandmother's stories? Why does she do this?
3. What does Grandmother mean when she says that perhaps Malila's mother "did not want to escape a tiger only to meet a crocodile?" Why does Grandmother think she hasn't sent for Malila?

Chapter Four

1. What clues do you have that the other children in the village have been told not to play with Malila?
2. Why does Malila not tell her grandmother when she wants something badly?
3. Do you think Malila's mother does not care about her daughter? Why do you think she has not sent for Malila?
4. Do you think Malila will be happy in school? Explain why or why not?

Chapter Five

1. Malila draws a picture of a princess with a lot of friends at school. Why does she do this?
2. What does Malila find out about her father? What clues tell her that this is the truth?
3. What does *suay* mean and how does it affect Malila?

Chapter Six

1. What does Grandmother mean by "...the dragon has breathed on you today?"
2. How does the fact that cutting Malila's hair makes her more beautiful fit in with Grandmother's theory about the breath of the dragon?
3. What does Grandmother mean when she says, "One who knows how to live may walk among the tigers?" Who are the tigers?

Chapter Seven

1. What news does Malila get from her mother? How does this make Malila feel?
2. Why is it important that Malila feels she and Grandmother were "lucky" the day of the kite contest?
3. The last line of the chapter, "The sun was warm on her face." should remind you of another time in the book when Malila enjoyed sunlight on her face. What time was that? How does this show that Malila is allowing herself to be happy again?

Chapter Eight

1. Grandmother is preparing Malila for something when she says that someday Malila would have to find her own answers. What is she warning Malila of?
2. Why does Grandmother feel that she may have been part of the reason that Malila has grown up so lonely? Do you think she is right?
3. What customs do Americans have that include playing tricks on one another as the water throwing during Songkran? Why is Grandmother so pleased that people threw water on them?

Chapter Nine

1. Why has Malila's art been unsuccessful until the art teacher encouraged her to draw to the story of the kick boxing match?
2. What does the teacher suggest Malila draw next?
3. What does Malila draw? What reason does the teacher give for the success of her drawing?

Chapter Ten

1. When Malila draws pictures of Thailand when her Grandmother becomes ill, she is preparing herself for something. What is she preparing for?
2. Does the river really answer Malila's questions? Malila has changed just as the river changes. How has Malila changed?
3. Why does Grandmother ask Malila to draw a picture when she tells her that Malila will soon join her mother in America? Why does Grandmother tell her to show the grandmother waving good-bye?

Chapter Eleven

1. What do we know about Grandmother when Malila releases a candle boat into the river?
2. What does she wish for Grandmother?
3. What does Malila want to remember and take with her to America?

Final Question:

Malila's mother knew that she might not be a good mother to Malila. She knew that Grandmother would be a better person to raise Malila. Do you think her decision to leave Malila in Thailand was a good one? Or do you think she was merely selfish? How does Malila see her mother's decision to leave her at the beginning of the book? Does she change her opinion at the end? How has her opinion changed? Do you think Malila would have been better off to have gone with her mother to America in the beginning? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Bhiksu: a monk

Chao Thi: the spirit of personal protection, guardian of the home

Chula: a large kite used in kite fighting

Ee tak: a game played with a paper scoop and fruit seeds

Farang: a Westerner, a foreigner

Fawn lep: literally “dance of the long nails,” a traditional folk dance

Haum: literally “smells good,” used as part of the names of food dishes to imply spiciness with a strong, pleasant aroma

Jai yen: literally “cool heart”; inner calm or personal peace

Kao dom: a sweetened rice dish

Khwan: spirit

Klong: a canal

Krap: a very low bow, sometimes on the knees, made to show special respect for an elder, royalty or a diety

Krengjai: consideration and respect for other people

Lakon nai: a theatrical dance, usually presented for royalty

Loy Krathong: a festival honoring the water spirits, celebrated in November

Mai pen rai: never mind

Malila noi: a small flower that is purple when in bud and turns white when it opens: has a strong, sweet aroma

Nam pla: a fish sauce

Pakpao: a small kite used in kite fighting

Pasin: a sarong

Pla dek: strips of raw fish preserved or marinated in a spicy sauce

Ramwong: a folk dance

San phra phum: literally “spirit house”; a replica of a house, the home of the guardian spirit Chao Thi

Sanouk: the joy of living

Sawatdee: a greeting; hello or good day

Sawatdee pimai: Happy New Year

Soi: a stret or lane

Songkran: the New Year festival, celebrated in mid- April, in which offerings are brought to the temples; one of the water festivals

Suay: unlucky

Takraw: a game using a rattan ball, usually played by children

Ta boon: a sacrifice

Taowetsuwan: a legendary giant

Tod Kathin: a festival that marks the end of the rainy season

Wai: the action of putting the palms together to show respect; often used when greeting another person

Wat: the buildings of a Buddhist religious community – the temple and related offices

Silk Umbrellas, Carolyn Marsden

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1

1. Who is Kun Ya?
2. What does Noi mean when she says, "The elephant is dancing!"
3. Noi is painting a butterfly and Kun Ya tells her, "your trembling is good." Why does she say that?
4. What is a samlaw?
5. What is the job that Noi and Kun Ya were doing all morning?

Chapter 2

1. Who is Kun Mere?
2. Kun Mere and Kun Ya were whispering together. What do you think they were talking about?
3. What job does Kun Pa do? Why?
4. Why does Kun Mere arrange for Ting to take a job?
5. How do you think Ting feels about working in a factory?

Chapter 3

1. Who is Buddha?
2. What does Sawasdee mean?
3. What does Kun Mere make that she sells to the other villages?
4. Why do you think that Noi is constantly thinking about painting?
5. Who is Kun Kru?
6. What does the morning poem mean?
*Having knowledge is like having great wealth;
You will never lack wherever you go.*

Chapter 4

1. How did Noi feel when Ting was late arriving home from the factory?
2. At the factory Ting did the same thing all day long. She used tweezers to balance a tiny part on a wire. Then she used a small tool to solder the part on. Would you like to do that?

Chapter 5

1. How did Noi feel, when Kun Ya wanted to take the umbrella she painted to be sold?
2. Where are the umbrellas sold?
3. Who are monks?
4. Who bought the umbrellas?
5. What does Noi buy at the market to drink? Why did she like it?
6. How much did Noi make for helping Kun Ya make the umbrellas?

Chapter 6

1. Ya says, We must be still for a moment, Noi, and listen to the umbrella. Look at its color and the way the light touches it. Know the story it wants you to tell before you begin. What does Kun Ya mean by this?
2. did Noi feel when Kun Ya placed the umbrella in her hands and said, “Here, finish it for me, little daughter.”

Chapter 7

1. Ting forgets to take her lunch to work one day. Why do you think Noi is so willing to take it to her?
2. What does Kun Mere say about the journey?
3. Noi wanted to take the lunch to Ting herself. Why?
4. How do you think Noi felt when she saw what Ting had to do all day?
5. What was Noi’s concern after visiting the factory?

Chapter 8

1. Do you think Kun Mere intends to send Noi to work in the factory?
2. What made Noi cry?
3. What is happening to Kun Ya?
4. Why can’t Kun Pa work?
5. Why is it so important that Ting works at the factory?
6. What is Loy Krathong?
7. Why would the family light 161 lamps for Loy Krathong?

Chapter 9

1. The story says that Kun Mere used to have time to sew blouses with pleats and ruffles for Noi and Ting but now she only sewed for Mr. Subsin. Why was that?
2. What were some of the foods the children ate for lunch at school?
3. Kriamas was Noi’s friend. Why did she not have to worry about working at the factory?

Chapter 10

1. Why did Kun Pa want to go to the market?
2. At the market, they talked to Mr. Poosub? What did want to know?
3. How do you think Noi felt when Mr. Poosub said, “she’s not painting but you could paint.”

Chapter 11

1. Why do you think Kun Ya slept for three whole days?
2. What was the first thing that Noi painted?
3. Why did Kun Ya hand Noi a mangosteen to paint?
4. As soon as Ting came home that night, what did Noi show her? Why?

Chapter 12

1. What does Ting want Noi to do with the painted umbrellas?
2. What are Kome?
3. Why do you think it took Noi so long to decide what Kome she wanted to buy?

Chapter 13

1. How did Noi feel about Ting having to work during Loy Krathong?
2. What food did Noi prepare for the monks?
3. Why did Noi let the bird escape?
4. Describe the Golden Buddha.
5. What did Noi do with the gold paste she bought?

Chapter 14

1. If the candle stayed lit until the krathong floated out of sight on the river, what happens?
2. Why did they place bits of hair and fingernail in the basket?
3. What was the best thing that happened during Krathong?

Chapter 15

1. What is a hinghoy?
2. What are Kome Loy?
3. Who is Mae Nam?
4. What does Kun Ya mean by saying, "Your krathong is in the hands of the river spirits now."

Chapter 16

1. What did Noi do with the bowl of rice and bits of crispy dried fish?
2. What is a spirit house?
3. The children had to bring a pineapple to school. Why?
4. Why did Noi leave hers for the flies to eat?

Chapter 17

1. How did Kun Mere feel when Mr. Subsin said he did not need anymore mosquito nets to sell?
2. What did Noi decide to do about the money problems in her home?
3. How did Noi feel about showing Mr. Poosub the umbrellas she had painted?
4. What did Mr. Poosub say about the umbrellas?
5. On the way home, Noi stopped by a tree to look at the trumpet flower. Why?
6. Predict what will happen next in the story.

Vocabulary

Bath: Thai coin worth about five US cents

Farang: Caucasian foreigner

Hinghoy: firefly

Kasalong: white flowers

Kome: paper lanterns

Kome loy: floating lanterns

Krathong: basket

Kun Kru: teacher

Kun Mere: Mother

Kun Pa: Father

Kun Ya: Grandmother

Loy Krathong: Harvest Festival (literally "Floating baskets")

Mae Nam Mother Water

Mangosteen: a dark purple fruit with white inside

Phang patit: earthen lamps

Rambutan: a bright red fruit with white inside

Samlaw: a large tricycle

Sarong: a rectangular length of fabric used as a garment

Sawasdee: hello and goodbye

Stang: Thai coin worth about one-fiftieth of a US cent

Thailand Books

Extension activities

1. Make a model of a spirit house or draw a spirit house. Be sure to use the words and pictures in the book to make sure the important elements are included.
2. Cook a simple Thai meal.
3. Make list of Thai customs. See if you can match each custom with an American custom that is somewhat like it. Ex. Folding hands and making the wai as a greeting is much like the American custom of shaking hands.
4. Thai language is primarily a picture language. Have students make up symbols and write the book's title in picture language of their own. Make up other title's for the book and write those in picture language.

Have students write a short story of how their parents or grandparents guide them in the process of growing up.

Vietnam Books

Pre-reading activities

1. Locate Vietnam on the map. Find the town of Mytho, where the author was born in the Mekong Delta.
2. Discuss the Vietnam War and how these stories took place before the war began.
3. Read aloud the introduction to The Land I Lost – which gives information about the village where the author grew up.

Water Buffalo Days, Huynh Quang Nhoung

Discussion Questions

(<http://www.harperchildrens.com/schoolhouse>)

1. Huynh's father says that the prefect bull has certain characteristics. What are they? What makes them special? (pg. 8-10) How does Tank embody these qualities?
2. How does Huynh's father bargain for the bull he wants? What do you think of his strategy? (pg. 11-16)
3. What are some of the different roles Tank plays in the community? In what ways does he help Huynh? What methods does Huynh use to train him. If Tank belonged to the class, what would you train him to do? How might you train him?
4. Describe O Lim, the friend of Huynh's father and owner of the water buffalo Hurricane. What do you think of his attitude during and after the fight between the bulls (pg. 50-57) or when Huynh's father is unable to give him Tank's firstborn son? (pg. 87-92) Why do you think O Lim reacts in these ways? What are O Lim's values?
5. When a traveler tries to buy Tank, Huynh's father refuses, since "Tank belonged to the whole hamlet" and also that he "was like a member of the family to him." What does Huynh's father mean by each of these statements? (pg. 84-85)
6. How does Tank die? Why does the author say, "Tank should have lived as long as Water Jug"? (p. 116)

The Land I Lost, Huynh Quang Nhoung

Discussion Questions

(<http://www.harperchildrens.com/schoolhouse>)

1. According to Huynh, what are the four most dangerous animals? Why is each one dangerous?
2. How do the villagers work together to solve their problems? Choose an example of one incident in which the whole community responds to a crisis. What roles do different people – and animals – play? (examples, pg. 19-29, 48-57)

3. In order to live with animals, and sometimes to fight or capture them, villagers have to understand their behavior. Find an example of someone using this kind of knowledge. How do you think they learn about animal behavior?
4. Describe Huynh's cousin. How is he able to train birds, snakes, and Tank? (examples, pg. 9, 11-18, 89-93) How does he prepare for his fight with the crocodile? (pg. 30-33) Do you think Huynh looks up to his cousin? Why or why not? Would you?
5. Describe Huynh's grandmother. What values are revealed in the story she tells the children when the horse snake is loose in the village? (pg. 52-54) What do the author's stories reveal about her? (pg. 61-68)
6. Why do you think the author called this book The Land I Lost?
7. How do you think the war affected Huynh's memories of his childhood?
8. Why do you think it's important to read a book like this?
9. Although The Land I Lost takes place in an exotic setting, Huynh also has feelings and experiences growing up that other children have as well. How is Huynh's childhood similar to those of other boys and girls, and how is it different?

Vietnam Books

Extension activities

(Have small groups do these different projects (based on personal interest) and present the learning to the class.)

1. Research more about Vietnam. Have groups research what Vietnam was like before the war, during the war, and in modern day times.
2. Research the different animals in the book (horse snake, water buffalo, wild hog, crocodiles, tiger, otter) and present findings to class.
3. Research the process of rice farming and present to the class.