Context:
Southeast Asians in California
Volume 12, Number 97, May-June, 1992

Folsom Cordova Unified School District
2460 Cordova Lane,
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Judy Lewis, Editor

Common Questions

9th annual

Southeast Asia Education Faire

will be

March 20, 1993

Q Why does the United States let Russians come here—aren't they communists?

Yikes! The "evil empire" characterization has left its mark.

Not everyone living in the fifteen republics formerly called the Soviet Union was a communist. Thousands—millions—of people had a government imposed upon them 75 years ago. Their lack of support for the communist government comes at a cost: "Oh, you're not a party member? Well, the schools are full. There are no ration coupons for you. There is no housing for you in the city. There is no job for you."

At various times, party membership was much more directly "encouraged": nonmembers could expect a visit from the KGB, relocation to the remote frontier, a new job in a labor camp.

Despite these efforts to "win the hearts and minds of the people," some people continued to resist the communist system. Religious groups—Jews and Christians in particular—recognized that persecution was part of maintaining beliefs.

Those who have come here—Russian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Armenian, Moldovian, Estonian, Belarus, Georgian, Latvian—are by definition *anti*-communist because they maintained their religious beliefs and practices.

Q Why have they come, and why do so many settle in Sacramento?

In 1988, as part of thawing relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (read: Reagan and Gorbachev), an agreement was reached allowing greater freedom for political dissidents (like Sakarov), and religious dissidents (primarily the Jewish).

Once people left the country, they became refugees, on the basis of persecution due to religious group membership. (The U.S. later defined the Christians, Jews and Russian Orthodox as refugees without having to leave their country of origin.)

Israel accepted (and continues to accept) millions of Jews from the former Soviet Union. The U.S. provides some financial support for the resettlement of Jews in Israel, and the international Jewish community has gathered millions of dollars for Operation Exodus. They privately sponsor ten thousand or so in the U.S. each year, assuming full costs. Another forty-five thousand or so have come each year since 1989 as official refugees.

In addtion, some five thousand others are Christians who were also religious dissidents. Sacramento has become a favorite settlement site for these religious refugees and the relatives they sponsor.

The reason for this is probably that two of the pastors who have been broadcasting short-wave religious programs into the Soviet Union for decades have congregations in this area. It is *not* because the Capital Christian Center brought Pentacostal refugees here and then left them to flounder, as many mistakenly believe. The bond of Pentacostal faith has, however, produced many volunteers from that congregation to help newcomers with their settlement and adjustment.

Q Is there a correct term for the people who come from the former Soviet Union?

A good question, one with which Dan Rather, Peter Jennings and other journalists wrestle. The organization of republics is now known as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but there is no equivalent term for the people— *CISeans*?!

Before the USSR changed to the CIS, we could call people by the general term "Soviet," although this term smacks of communism, and thus represents what people have fled. There is no other term—like "European" or "Scandanavian"—that refers to the various peoples as a group. Using the USSR flag as a way to greet newcomer students is obviously a mistake.

One recourse is to use "Russian-speaking peoples" as a reference (which may not include everyone and is politically incorrect—see below), or to actually *know* to which of the different ethnic/linguistic groups you are referring. Europe provides a useful analogy. Italians are not Polish, Spanish are not Irish, Serbians are not Greeks; each speaks a different language. French is one of the near-universal languages: do we call all these different people "French-speaking peoples"? Probably not, within earshot. English is growing in popularity as a lingua franca: how about "English-speaking peoples"? Again, probably not—this kind of linguistic colonialism doesn't provide much useful information.

Q What are the 15 new nations, what are the people called, and are they likely to be in the U.S.?

- **Armenians**—Armenia was the first Christian state in the 300's with a written language in 401. Religion is a strong part of peoples' identity. Much of their history can be read in the Bible. There are many Armenian Pentacostals and Baptists here, and Armenians are particularly sensitive about having to use the Russian language in the U.S.—most would rather use English! Because they began arriving about a year later than other Christian refugees, the schools and agencies are likely to have Russian or Russian/Ukrainian interpreters already on board.
- **Azerbaijianis**—They are Shiite Moslems, their language is closely related to Turkish, and they have ties to Iran. The conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijianis stem from Christian-Muslim and Turkish-Caucasian hostilities over the past 600 years. Azerbaijianis are not likely to be here as Christian or Jewish refugees, but Armenians from Azerbaijian are.
- **Belarus**—Belarus (the name is the same for the nation, nationality, and language) was formerly Byleorussia. Many are Christian, and this group is well-represented among recent refugees.
- **Estonians**—Estonians may be here as Christians. The people have been ruled by Germans, Swedish, and Russians in the past. The nation was independent between the world wars (1918-40).
- **Georgians**—They have had a written language since the 400's. Turks, Persians, and Russians have fought for control of Georgia. There are some Georgians here as Christian refugees.
- **Kazakhs**—They speak a Turkic language, are Muslim, and are descendants of the

Mongols, who conquered various other peoples over the course of history. They are a minority in their own republic (41% are Russian, 36% are Kazakh). Kazakhs are not likely to be here as Christian refugees, but Russians from Kazakhstan might be.

- **Kirghiz**—These people speak a Turkic language, and have no tradition of literacy other than Russian. The nation is called "Kyrgyzstan", the nationality "Kirghiz" (singular or plural).
- **Latvians**—Latvia has been ruled by Germans, Swedish, Polish, and Russians in the past. There are Latvians here as Christian refugees.
- **Lithuanians**—Lithuania was once combined with Poland in a powerful union against first Germans and then Russians. The nation was independent between the world wars. There could be Lithuanian Christians here.
- **Moldovians**—They are ethnically Romanian, and Moldova may eventually reunite with Romania. There are Moldovian Christians here.
- **Russians**—They have long been the dominant ethnic group, and the Russian language has been the lingua franca (like it or not) for all the various peoples subsumed under the Soviet Union. Russia has colonized all the other republics—sent Russians to live in other peoples' lands—and are generally resented by non-Russians. Within Russia are autonomous regions ("ethnic groups without armies"?) inhabited by non-Russian ethnic groups like the Tartars and the Bashkirs.
- **Tajiks**—These people from Tajikistan are ethnically and linguistically related to the Iranians. The Tajiks found an unsuccessful guerrilla war against the Soviets for several years after Tajikistan's annexation.
- **Turkmen**—The people of Turkmenistan were nomadic tribesmen until the Soviets organized a republic in 1924. (The land they occupied was conquered by the Russian Empire in the 1800's.)
- **Ukrainians**—Byzantine Christianity was imported in the 900's and became Russian Orthodoxy, outlawed by the Soviets along with other religions. Ukraine was once part of Poland, so many Ukrainians and Polish are ethnically the same (look at the family names: "—sky"). The majority of Pentacostal refugees in Sacramento are Ukrainian.
- **Uzbeks**—They speak a Turkic dialect, and follow Muslim. Uzbekistan has been part of the Russian Empire since the mid-1800's. There are Uzbeks (or Russians or Ukrainians from Uzbekistan) here as Christian refugees.

Q How can I tell who is who?

Ask. Most newcomers are thrilled to know that someone wonders who they are, what language they speak, what language they read.

Q How do you pronounce Nguyễn?

Not *noo-jen*! A better pronunciation is *wen* or *nwen*. This is a common Vietnamese family name.

Attempting to pronounce the sound we spell "ng" at the beginning of a word—something English-speakers haven't done since infancy—helps us understand the process of first hearing, then pronouncing alien sounds or familiar sounds in alien positions.

Begin by saying *sing*—feel where your tongue hits the soft palate, and the position of all the parts of the mouth and throat. Listen to the sound; compare it to *sin*. Now say *sing oh*, as in "now you sing the word 'oh'." While you're driving in your car or clipping the grass, repeat "sing-oh, sing-oh, sing-oh", feeling how the parts of the mouth fit together, and listening to the sounds, letting the gap between the words disappear.

Now trick your mouth, by dropping off the *si* and leaving *ng-oh*. Voilà! you have correctly pronounced the Vietnamese family name *Ngo*.

Now change the vowel: *ng-oo*. Now add a second syllable: *ee-en*. To be really Vietnamese, let your voice break on the second syllable.

It's not an easy word for English-speakers, but each step away from *Nujen* and toward *Nguyễn* helps students and parents know that you care enough to know a little.

If in doubt, go for ***nwen***.

Q Is it true that most Asian refugees speak Vietnamese?

Numerically, most do: according to the 1990 census, 614,547 Vietnamese are

in the U.S., some 61% of Southeast Asians. But, the other 39% speak Lao, Cantonese, Hmong, Khmer, Lahu, Khmu, Lua, or other languages.

Khmer come from Cambodia. Lao, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Khmu and Lua come from Laos. Vietnamese, most Cantonese, and montagnard groups (like Jarai and Sre) come from Vietnam. Cham, most of whom are Muslim, come from Vietnam or Cambodia.

Q "Speak English at home so your children learn English faster." Is that good advice?

Think about it: if parents are limited in English, how much verbal interaction will there be with children?

Studies like the Caplan report on the success of boat children (*Scientific American*, February 1992) report that one factor associated with higher achieving students is having been read to—in the home language or in English.

What this advice reveals is the teacher's lack of awareness of the language acquisition process. It also sends a message that the teacher de-values the home language, and thinks that the human brain is capable of acquiring only one language at a time. It is also criticism of the child's progress in so speaking English.

Helpful advice is for parents to ask children questions and really listen to their answers; to read or tell stories; to make plenty of reading material available in the languages the child is learning to read.

Q *Peanuts* and *public*. Why preview key vocabulary?

Recently a Vietnamese youth in a Sheltered English class for Family Life asked the bilingual aide: "Why is this teacher talking about *peanuts* so much? Do we study about food in Family Life?"

What the teacher said was *penis*; what the student heard was *peanuts*. Since Vietnamese has few final consonants, and no final consonant blends, he heard *penis* and thought of *peanuts*, a word he had heard before.

Another student wondered why the teacher was talking about a *public* bone—what kind of bone is there that people can see? (*Pubic* bone, not *public* bone.)

This kind of confusion can be lessened when the key vocabulary is listed on the board, on the overhead, or on a sheet of paper. *Previewing* the vocabulary (hearing it; seeing it; understanding it) helps limit the range of guesses about the words heard during a lesson.

Q Some teachers have students copying from their book or from the board. Is this really helpful?

It's not as bad as we think at first, especially for students who can read and write another language. If a student is literate in Lao or Farsi or Chinese or Russian or Korean or Vietnamese, it is a familiar procedure to look at a series of shapes, place them in short-term memory, then recall them in the correct order and orientation and write them so that someone else can recognize them. It is only the particular shapes and sequences of English that are different.

The process of copying text verbatim is a decent exercise in shape recognition and reproduction, and gives students practice with the basic 200-300 reading words that make up more than 50% of any text. For languages that are written right to left, for languages that do not use spaces to separate words, or for languages that do not use punctuation marks, this kind of practice is good for learning new formats.

Finally, if the student knows some of the words, this is a predictable and "do-able" task that provides additional reading input, which will result in acquisition of reading and writing skills.

As the student progresses, the next step is to leave out parts of the text, and have students fill in the blanks—white out every ninth word, or leave off the concluding paragraph. Or, have the student change the tense from present to past. Or, have the student change the character from a male to female. Eventually, as the ability to produce original textual output increases, less and less of the model will be needed.

The reason teachers frown at this boring repetitive activity is because it stifles creativity and individual variation, both highly desirable student outcomes. However, for stu-

dents new to English, creativity takes second seat to the possibility of success.

Q How can the choice of words affect interpersonal relations?

"You should..."

Do you find that the people you've been helping are ungrateful and difficult?

It may be a matter of your chosen vocabulary. Record and listen to what you say to people: how often do the words *should* and *ought* occur?

Teachers and parents are generally allowed to use words like *should* and *ought*. It is an accepted role for teachers and parents to instruct children in the unwritten rules of conduct in our particular cultural groups.

Problems occur when we slip into the teacher/parent role in inappropriate situations, for example, when dealing adult-to-adult with people from other languages and cultures. We assume that people will appreciate our taking on the teacher/parent role, but....would you, in similar circumstances?

By using *should* and *ought*, we are implicitly saying to an other: "you are a child and it is my responsibility to instruct you". If this is an un-asked-for relationship, the response will likely be (1) challenging the implied subordinate status or (2) avoiding future interactions.

Q When is dating a life choice?

Hmong girls are really in a bind. If a girl "goes out" with a boy, especially if it is just the two of them, they may end up married. How does this happen?

Let's say a girl goes out with a boy, and comes home late. If there is even the slightest possibility that intimacy has occurred, the parents of the girl may send a messenger to the parents of the boy to begin marriage negotiations. Or, if the boys' cousins are aware and want to save the girls' family's "face", they will send a messenger to her house. Marriage negotiations may procede, or may be broken off because the two are too young. Sometimes, however, the girl's family insists, and the boy's family has no choice but to go along.

Within the community, there is increasing recognition that "going out" is seen by the Americanized Hmong youth as a normal adolescent activity. The parents—often motivated by the fear of a damaged reputation—are responding to new problems with traditional solutions, often with unfortunate results.

Knowing this, can you imagine what Hmong teens feel when hearing about the Junior Prom, the Senior trip, or even Friday night movies?

Resources

From Nyet to Da: Understanding the Russians

(Richmond, Yale, Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1992).

A book designed for Americans going to Russia—but helpful for Americans interacting with Russians (and to some extent Ukrainians and Belarus) in this country. In addition to comments about the impact of history, recent events, geography, climate, and religion on cultural characteristics of the people in comparison to Americans, there is a chapter devoted to negotiating with Russians. Among the author's observations:

- Moscow can be a cold and impersonal place, where a visitor's requests all too often meet with an automatic nyet. But Russians respond to a human approach, and they can be warm and helpful once a good interpersonal relationship has been established. When this point is reached, *nyet* becomes *da*, and deals can be done. This is the key to understanding the Russians.
- The harsh climate explains the Russians' strength, their ability to endure extreme hardship, and their bleak outlook on life. Climate has also made them cautious.
- The Ukraine, located in a southern, more temperate zone...Ukrainians tend to be more outgoing and optimistic than their northern cousins.
- Weather, wars, violence, cataclysmic changes, and oppressive rule have made the Russians pessimistic. Americans should not be put off by their doom and gloom, nor should they try to make optimists of them. The best approach is to express understanding and sympathy.
- America's commercial experience and Russia's lack of a mercantile tradition have given the two countries different world outlooks. ..."Commerce is by its very

Resources

nature conducive to compromise." Compromise is native to America but not to Russia.

- The New World is new, only some 400 years old, compared to Russia's more than 1,000. Russians have been living in their native environment from the beginning of time, and change has come slowly. The new has been welcomed in America, the old has been revered in Russia.
- The tradition of the group predates the communalism of communism. Russians carry the group with them. *Sobornost* (communal spirit, togetherness) distinguishes Russians from Westerners for whom individualism and competitiveness are more common characteristics.
- There is no real translation for *privacy*...
- Sobornost helps explain behavior in crowds. Physical contact with strangers does not bother them...in crowds, they touch, push, shove, and even use elbows without hard feelings.
- The importance of the group affects Russians' attitudes towards individual success. It may be morally wrong to get ahead at the expense of others.
- Heritages of the past include a Russian preference for the spoken form of communication, which favors oral over written exams, and a dependence on rote replies.
- Masses of people and a chronic scarcity of goods and services can make Russians appear brusque, demanding, and insistent—very aggressive about trying to acquire things they need but do not have. A "no" is the expected official response, and is never accepted as the final word. Believing that every response can be manipulated and changed, they will repeat their requests over and over again, adding a new twist each time.

The Clay Marble

(Ho, Minfong, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991. $13.95)

Historical fiction for junior high level students, the story of Dara and her struggles as a Cambodian refugee in Nong Chan camp.

The author, who worked in the border camps in 1980, grew up in Thailand and studied in Taiwan and at Cornell University. She also wrote *Rice without Rain* (New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1990), set in

Ethnic Lao—Who Are They?

A sourcebook for classroom teachers by Patricia Moore-Howard, author/compiler of the previously published sourcebooks for teachers of Hmong and Mien students.

Contents include:

- The Land and the People
- History
- Characteristics & Language of the Lao
- Education of the Laos
- Traditional Lao Family Structure
- Courtship, Marriage and Children
- Handcrafts and Clothing
- Village Agriculture and Houses
- Lao Religion
- Festivals and Other Celebrations
- Appendices: map, folk tales, refugee sketches, clothing, expressions commonly used, sayings.

Contact Dr. Moore at 2731 Sutterville Road, Sacramento Ca 95820 for more information.

Into a Strange Land—Unaccompanied Refugee Youth in America

(Ashabranner, B. and M., New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1987. $14.95)

Book written at upper elementary to junior high level with information, stories and photos of teens arriving in the U.S. as refugees.

Contents include:

- The most vulnerable people
- "My father told me good-bye"
- The refugee camp
- Before they arrive
- Into a strange land
- Depression: an emotional time bomb
- Learning and changing
- The throwaway kids
- Being a foster parent: hard but worth doing
- Group homes
- Emancipation: end and beginning
- "Of profound humanitarian concern"

Poster! Poster! Poster! Poster!

This poster advertising the 8th annual Southeast Asia Education Faire is available for $8.00.

The words can be trimmed off, leaving even margins for hanging.

The poster is a four-color reproduction of an original watercolor-on-silk painting created by artist Tran Dac for this occasion.

The scene is a fantasy based on the familiar Saigon market, but its various activities reveal a world of interaction between peoples and ideas—Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics, Mien, Hmong, Lahu, Lahu, "fa-rang" (Westerner), Cambodian, Chinese, Lao and Cambodian Buddhists, Khmu—buying and selling western fruit and Asian fruit, TV's, fabrics, paj ntaub, etc.

There's a lots here for oral language development, plus it makes an intriguing decoration for visiting parents.

Finally, the proceeds from the sale of this poster will pay for its production. If we don't make back the cost of printing it, we won't plan on doing another next year. It's a good cause! Buy a couple.

Send $8.00 per poster (includes tax and shipping) to: *Refugee Educators' Network, 2460 Cordova Lane, Rancho Cordova CA 95670. (916) 635-6815, fax 635-6815.*

How about using this poster to raise money at your school? Buy lots of 100 posters at a lot price of $5.00 each (plus shipping), then you sell them for $8.00—or even $10.00. Minimum amount at this price: 100 posters.

Renew!

Send a check or purchase order to *Folsom Cordova Unified School District* for $10.00. The subscription year is from September 1992 to June 1993, and there will be 7 or 8 issues of *Context*. Mail to 2460 Cordova Lane, Rancho Cordova CA 95670. Thanks for the support!

This newsletter is produced by Folsom Cordova's Transitional English Programs as part of the district's staff training requirement (State Program for LEP Students, Item CCR-LEP.8).

It is also sent to subscribers, whose $10.00 pays the costs of mailing. The devleopment and printing is funded through EIA-LEP funds, not district general funds. This project originated as part of a Title VII Staff Training grant, 1982-85.

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Order form

Make payable to Folsom Cordova USD/SEACRC—

☐ #S8801 *Handbook for Teaching Hmong-Speaking Students* Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, Yang, 1988. $4.50 (carton discount for lots of 58: $3.50)

☐ #S8802 *Handbook for Teaching Khmer-Speaking Students* Ouk, Huffman, Lewis, 1988. $5.50 (carton discount for lots of 40: $4.50)

☐ #S8903 *Handbook for Teaching Lao-Speaking Students* Luangpraseut, Lewis 1989. $5.50 (carton discount for lots of 42: $4.50)

☐ ~~#S8904 *Introduction to the Indochinese and their Cultures* Chhim, Luangpraseut, Te, 1989. $9.00 (carton discount for lots of 32: $8.00)~~ Out of print; a few with scuffed covers: $5.00

☐ #S8805 *English-Hmong Bilingual Dictionary of School Terminology Cov Lus Mis Kuj Txhais ua Lus Hmoob* Huynh D Te, translated by Lue Vang, 1988 $2.00 (no carton price)

☐ #S9006 *Vietnamese Language Materials Sourcebook* Huynh Dinh Te, 1990 $2.00 (no carton discount)

Add California tax if applicable. For orders under $30.00 add $2.00 per copy shipping and handling. For orders over $30.00, add 10% shipping/handlng. If you wish UPS for quantity orders, please request it.

☐ #S9999 *CONTEXT: Southeast Asians in California*, annual subscription $10.00.

Refugee Educators' Network meeting: September 17, 1992

Make payable to Refugee Educators' Network—

___	#R001	Lao Alphabet Poster	$3.50
___	#R002	Lao Primer	$4.00
___	#R003	Lao 1st Grade Reader	$5.00
___	#R004	Lao 2nd Grade Reader	$5.50
___	#R005	Lao 3rd Grade Reader	$6.50
___	#R006	Hmong Primer	$4.00
___	#R007	Hmong dict. (Xiong)	$25.00
___	#R008	1992 Faire poster	$8.00

Includes tax; $1.00 per item shipping/handling up to $30.00. Over $30.00, 10% s/h.

Make payable to Lue Vang,
PO Box 423, Rancho Cordova CA 95741-0423.

Grandmother's Path, Grandfather's Way (Vang & Lewis, revised printing 1990)

$14.95, plus $2.00 shipping/handling and applicable CA tax. Wholesale price available for buyers with resale permit; call 916 635-6815 for information.

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