

# **Social Studies Teaching and Learning**

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## Is Culture Always Celebrated? An Inquiry-based Exploration on Asian Americans for Early Elementary Students

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### Abstract

Using the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), this pedagogical article provides context, plans, and materials for an inquiry on the culture and contributions of Asian Americans for early elementary students (K-2). This inquiry, focused on both history and current events, is intended to serve as a jumping-off point for more in-depth explorations. Students will be introduced to elements of Asian American heritage, culture, and accomplishments. The questions foregrounding this inquiry are: Is culture always celebrated? What can names teach us? What can food teach us? How can the accomplishments of Asian Americans inspire us? A full IDM and appendix of suggested classroom resources is included.

**Keywords:** inquiry-based learning, Asian American history, primary grades

As readers of this journal are well aware, social studies teachers at all grade levels now face important ethical and pedagogical decisions when planning for instruction. The twin pandemics of Covid 19 and racism, and in particular increased hatred towards Asian Americans, provide new opportunities for critical inquiries that build students' critical thinking skills, cultural awareness, pride, joy, and empathy. According to the national report of hate crimes published by Stop AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) Hate, from March 19, 2020 through June 30, 2021, physical assault, vandalism, online and public hate, and incidents involving the elderly all increased (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). With this in mind, the following article will present the context, plans, and materials for an inquiry on Asian Americans for early elementary students (K-2). Asian Americans are vastly underrepresented in curricular spaces (Rodriguez & Kim, 2018), and this inquiry is intended to serve as a jumping off point for more in-depth explorations. Students will be introduced to elements of Asian American heritage, culture, and accomplishments. The questions foregrounding this inquiry are: Is culture always celebrated? What can names teach us? What can food teach us? How can the accomplishments of Asian Americans inspire us?

### Context for Teaching and Learning

With a firm understanding of the abilities, commitments to justice, and curiosity of young children, (e.g., Cowhey, 2006; Vasquez, 2004) we chose to design curricula for K-2 students. Social studies is typically marginalized in elementary classrooms in favor of reading and math instruction (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; Fitchett et al., 2014) but we know social studies enhances critical thinking and teaches students to make informed arguments based on evidence (National

Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2017). These skills are important and deserve priority, even with our youngest learners. We use the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) (Swan et al., 2018) to outline our curricular route. The IDM, with its organization of questions, tasks and sources, creates space for teachers to teach *with* and *for* inquiry, emphasizing both content and thinking outcomes (Parker, 2018).

To frame the inquiry, we sought a “juicy piece of content” (Swan et al., 2018, p. 16) that would pique students’ interest and lead to investigation. The current surge in acts of hate toward Asian Americans (Nuyen, 2021) makes visible the glaring lack of curricular resources related to the Asian American experience, both past and present (Kleinrock, 2021). Noting this, the inquiry is focused on Asian Americans. To make this a critical inquiry (Crowley & King, 2018), themes of power and oppression are woven throughout, while centralizing the often-marginalized perspectives of Asian Americans.

According to the Pew Research center, Asian Americans are incredibly diverse (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). They make up the youngest and fastest-growing major racial or ethnic group in the United States and represent at least 19 heritage countries, along with a wide variety of socioeconomic, educational, and cultural distinctions. Asian Americans live in every U.S. state, with different origin groups being represented in some regions more than others. Overall, “there are more than 22 million Asian Americans (about 6% of the U.S. population), representing nearly 50 ethnic groups and speaking more than 100 languages, and they make up the fastest growing racial or ethnic group among eligible U.S. voters” (Waxman, 2021). Despite this, Asian American history and present-day experiences are largely absent from elementary curricula.

The term “Asian American” was coined by graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka in 1968 to create solidarity for political purposes (Kambhampaty, 2020). While it is used as a general identifier, there are vast and important cultural distinctions that fall under this umbrella. As such, it makes sense to frame the inquiry as an entry point to understanding the cultures and experiences, both past and present, of this massive group of people. It is harder to fear or hate people when there is some level of understanding and respect about their lives. Importantly, one purpose of this inquiry is to teach elementary students specifics about Asian American culture and communities, including their contributions to society, both past and present. This approach interrupts the stereotypical version of the Asian American as the passive and obedient “forever foreigner” (Lee et al., 2009) and uses questions, tasks, and sources to create new and more accurate understandings.

### **Topic Implementation: Outlining the Inquiry**

The following instructional plan serves as an entry point for young students to the beauty, difference, oppression, and resistance within Asian American communities. Several points of connection are included so students can consider their own cultural practices in comparison to what they’re learning. In doing so, the inquiry serves as both “windows and mirrors” (Sims-Bishop, 1990). Asian American students may see their lives reflected in the curricula (though, we acknowledge we do not include content on all Asian American heritage countries, nor do we

include specific content on mixed race identities) and those students who do not identify as Asian American will look through windows to learn new information. Particular sources also explicitly create opportunities to begin to explore the discrimination of and advocacy for Asian Americans.

Using the IDM Blueprint™ (<https://c3teachers.org/inquiry-design-model/>), this inquiry is designed around an overarching compelling question (see Appendix A). The three supporting questions further stimulate curiosity among students as they analyze primary and secondary sources and complete tasks to work toward answering the compelling question with an informed argument. Note that the blueprint is only a snapshot. Teachers are encouraged to adjust and differentiate according to student backgrounds, interests, and needs. We also encourage taking a broad, critically engaging perspective; students should understand that these are just a *few* examples of the depth and diversity of Asian Americans and Asian American heritage. There is much more beyond these examples to explore. Each part of the inquiry is described below.

### **Staging the Question: Is culture always celebrated?**

This inquiry begins by activating background knowledge and generating excitement around topics of study. To stage the compelling question: *Is culture always celebrated?* The teacher can ask students to turn and tell shoulder partners about the holidays their families celebrate. During the ensuing whole group discussion, teachers can record class celebrations on chart paper. To take it a step further, the teacher may also ask about culturally specific clothing, music, language, games or food students enjoy. Once ideas are shared, the teacher can announce they'll be learning about different parts of Asian American culture. Next, the teacher can show students a world map to introduce the geographic scope, pointing to and naming all of the countries included in the term "Asian Americans." We suggest the teacher has images ready to share from several or all of the countries to give students a sense of the varying landscapes and people who live there. We also encourage stocking the classroom library with non-fiction books about Asian countries that students can spend time with on their own throughout the inquiry (see Appendix B). The books we list will challenge and engage a wide range of learners, as they offer photographs of life in different Asian countries as primary sources for analysis. As the class moves forward with the inquiry, the teacher should keep the world map, students' discussion responses, and pictures from Asian countries available for reference.

### **Supporting Question 1: What Can Names Teach Us?**

After staging the question, students should have an emerging understanding that there are many Asian countries with different lifestyles and cultures. To further investigate culture, teachers will now pose Supporting Question 1: *What can names teach us?* The inquiry begins with something everyone has: a name. This will allow students to connect across cultures as they learn and share stories about a key part of their identities. It is important to note that based on the sources we offer this question will focus on one Asian culture: Korean. Help the students find Korea on the map, explaining that there is a North and a South Korea. Share briefly that

while these two used to be unified, they have been separated for several generations due to political division. Throughout this inquiry, it is important that teachers specify what Asian countries are the focus of each lesson and resist blending them all into the broader “Asian American” category.

Ask students if they know how their names were chosen. Some may be named after family members or other influential people, others may have cultural ties. A collection of students may not know how or why they got their names and could do some follow up investigation at home. Students may also note the names of pets, special places, or their school, town/city, state, and country. All the while, encourage students to consider what those names tell us. To explore names further, below is a collection of sources or activities for teachers to use in ways that will best serve their students.

### ***Source 1: Fiction Read-Aloud***

Literacy is a protected disciplinary space in elementary classrooms and that makes read-alouds an excellent bridge to social studies content. We specifically recommend *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003), a story about a Korean girl who moves to the United States and considers changing her name to be more American. This story could serve as a springboard to the exploration of names.

Woven into this inquiry are consistent opportunities to complicate cultural representations. When reading *The Name Jar*, for instance, teachers should call into question the perceived need to make one’s name more American. While the main character Unhei does end up finding the beauty and meaning in her Korean name and opts to keep it, it is worth pausing to consider with students why Unhei momentarily desired to change her name. This supporting question is not designed to promote assimilation or the idea that Asian Americans are forever foreigners. Rather, it stands as an example of the cultural significance of names and the challenges some students face when their names sound unfamiliar to peers. Suggested discussion questions for *The Name Jar* are:

- What is important to Unhei?
- What does Unhei learn from her family?
- What does Unhei learn from her new classmates?
- What does Unhei learn about herself?
- Why did Unhei feel like she should change her name? What do you think about that?
- How could you welcome a new student to your classroom?
- Have you ever felt the need to change something about yourself in order to fit in? What was that like for you?
- What did you learn about Korean culture?

### **Source 2: Critical, Nonfiction Read-Aloud**

While fictional stories can certainly introduce students to different cultures, it is important that even our youngest learners analyze nonfiction and primary sources in order to build accurate understandings. To add a critical element, we recommend *A Kid's Book About Anti-Asian Hate* (Pham, 2021); it was written in response to the Covid-fueled rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans. Kim Pham, the Vietnamese American author, writes about her experience with her name and the importance of cultural pride - even when others see you as “different”. Teachers should find Vietnam on the world map and explain it’s a distinct country in Asia with its own history and cultural traditions. Reading this book aloud will invite the opportunity to talk about discrimination, bias, fear of difference/the unknown, cultural pride, and advocacy. Suggested discussion questions for *A Kid's Book About Anti-Asian Hate* are:

- Why was it a big deal for Thu Kim Pham to choose to go by her middle name?
- Why were people really mean to Kim? What do you think about this?
- What is anti-Asian hate?
- What are Asian Americans like?
- How can you use your voice to stand up against anti-Asian hate?

### **Source 3: Image Analysis**

Teachers may also choose to lead students (as a whole class, in small groups, or individually) through an analysis of images of life in Korea and Vietnam. When analyzing images, have students complete a chart modeled after the Library of Congress’s Primary Source Analysis Tool (Savage, 2011). This tool guides students through several simple steps in analyzing images or text using the prompts: I see, I think, I wonder/observe. By modeling analysis, teachers can organize this task in a simple “I do, we do, you do” structure. A collection of websites with photographs and maps of Korea and Vietnam and respective cultural artifacts is provided in Appendix B as suggested primary sources for the image analysis. Teachers may choose to select additional or alternative images for the analysis.

### **Formative Performance Task**

To help students process the content of this supporting question and its sources, they may complete a three-column table. In the first column, students draw themselves, write their names and what it tells about them. In the second, they draw Unhei (from *The Name Jar*) and write what her name tells about her. In the third column, write and decorate Thu Kim Pham’s name (don’t draw her since we don’t know what she looks like) and write what her name tells us. Extension: Create a captioned drawing or written description of standing up to anti-Asian hate.

### **Supporting Question 2: What Can Food Teach Us?**

Before talking through the instructional steps related to this question, it’s important to pause and consider what this question is *not* intended to do. A common approach to multicultural education, particularly with young children, is to implement a “tourist curriculum” that focuses



on food and holidays (Kohl, 1994). In doing so, cultural contexts are overgeneralized and simplified. While our second supporting question is intended to explore cultural cuisine, it is crucial to understand that this is one part of a larger inquiry. Be sure to treat this question as a subsection of the much broader investigation into Asian Americans. Emphasize with students that food is one part of culture, but there is much more to explore. As with question one, there is an opportunity within this question to engage in critical conversations about “othering” and belonging and understanding differences. Lean into this and show students the complexities of identity. To begin this lesson, pose the supporting question, “*What can food teach us?*” and engage in a discussion about favorite foods, family recipes, and cultural traditions related to food to generate interest and activate background knowledge.

### ***Source 1: Fictional Read Alouds***

Capitalizing on the space in K-2 classrooms for literacy, we continue to offer read alouds as valid sources. *The Pho Team* (Do Zuniga, 2020) introduces readers to the ingredients of pho, a popular Vietnamese dish. Reading this book aloud provides the opportunity for students to see Vietnam on the world map and to begin to explore this Asian country with its own culture and traditions. A second book, *Hot Hot Roti for Dadaji* (Zia, 2011), is about an Indian American family and their food. Be sure to differentiate India from Vietnam. Teachers may also supplement these stories with primary sources - images, videos, or food/recipes from Vietnam and India (Appendix C). Suggested discussion questions for the Pho Team

- What ingredients are familiar to you?
- What ingredients are new to you?
- Would you try pho (if you haven’t already)?
- What is great about trying foods from different cultures?

Suggested discussion questions for *Hot Hot Roti for Dadaji*:

- What did you learn about Indian culture?
- How is this family like yours?
- How is this family different from yours?

### ***Source 2: Critical Read Aloud***

*Min Jee’s Lunch* (Kleinrock, 2020) from Learningforjustice.org brings our focus back to Korean culture and tells the story of a child who is ostracized for the Korean lunch she brings to school. This book creates the space to talk about inclusion and advocacy.

### ***Formative Performance Task***

Students complete a captioned drawing of themselves sharing a meal with a character from one of the books. Be sure they label their meal with dishes from the stories (e.g., pho, kimchi jjigae).

Extension: Create a comic strip of how you would stand up for a friend whose food was made fun of in the cafeteria.

### Supporting Question 3: How Can Asian Americans’ Accomplishments Inspire Us?

We designed this inquiry to guide students toward understanding the term “Asian Americans” and to introduce some cultural context. From here, we want students to start to look for Asian Americans in the world, hopefully bringing with them a budding appreciation for the beauty and complexity of Asian culture. Asian Americans are often seen as the compliant and hardworking model minority (Rodriguez & Kim, 2018). This stereotype is harmful and ultimately serves to pit minority groups against each other. Asian Americans have a complex history in the United States that includes exploitation, incarceration, and resistance (Takaki, 2012).

Asian Americans have contributed to U.S. society in outstanding ways. That said, representation matters and Asian Americans are portrayed minimally and also inaccurately in media and pop culture (Rodriguez & Kim, 2018). Therefore, the final supporting question is designed to showcase past and present Asian Americans and their accomplishments. In doing so, we are intentionally including voices that are not typically heard. While some of the people are well-known (e.g., Kamala Harris), we also invite teachers to center the experiences of Asian Americans who are less known, but no less important.

#### Sources

The sources for this question introduce students to a range of influential people, representing various stages of life, career paths, and heritages. We also include a superhero, a clearly fictional character, but an engaging access point for younger students. Released in 2021, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is the first Asian superhero movie in the Marvel Universe and is an incredibly significant moment in representation for the Asian American community (Hernandez, 2021). Depending on the ages and abilities of students, a teacher may also ask students to research people on their own after perhaps exploring the biography and accomplishments of one of the individuals listed below. Or, teachers may choose to lead students in a series of read-alouds with various books. If exploring the life and accomplishments of Vice President Kamala Harris, a teacher may also choose to show students her acceptance speech as the 2020 Vice President-Elect. Some of these biographies also invite the opportunity to talk about being mixed race, another distinguishing element of the Asian American Experience (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021).

The following sources are offered for any combination of the learning tasks suggested in this section (see references and Appendix D for full details):

- The story of Olympic diver, Sammy Lee
- Articles and books for young readers about Senator Tammy Duckworth
- Articles and books for young readers about Vice President Kamala Harris
- The story of Shang-chi (a Marvel superhero)
- The story of Rock climber, Ashima Shiraishi

### ***Formative Performance Task***

In small groups, students present information on the individuals they learned about in various formats (written, drawing, acting). These brief presentations should highlight the contributions of each individual in American culture and society.

Extension: Find an accomplished Asian American in the community to interview or write a letter to or invite them to speak to visit your classroom.

### **Summative Performance Task: Closing the Inquiry**

To close the inquiry, students revisit the compelling question, “*Is culture always celebrated?*” They construct an argument using evidence through the mode of their choice (e.g., visual creation or written response). Teachers may choose to close the inquiry by taking informed action in their lives or communities. This could take the form of any of the following:

- Learn more about anti-Asian hate and how to interrupt it.
- Continue to learn about the diversity and contributions of Asian Americans and teach others.
- Continue to learn about Asian countries and cultures.
- Try new foods or Asian cultural experiences represented in your community.

### **Recommendations**

Although this inquiry is one contribution to many potential learning opportunities about Asian Americans, it is our hope that this can be seen as a jumping off point for primary teachers who are interested in combating hate through lessons that center pride, joy, cultural awareness, and empathy. When integrated as a regular part of the school day, learning experiences such as these move us towards a more inclusive, equitable, and justice-oriented curriculum.

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## Appendix A: IDM Blueprint™

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™		
<b>Compelling Question</b>	Is culture always celebrated?	
<b>Standards and Practices</b>	<p>K.H.CH.2 Compare traditions found in communities over time, including those from diverse backgrounds (Human Interactions and Interconnections)</p> <p>1.G.HI.1 Describe how culture and experience influence the cultural landscape of places and regions within their community and state. (Human Interactions and Interconnections)</p> <p>2.G.HI.1 Compare the ways various cultural groups connect and interact within North America. (Human Interactions and Interconnections)</p>	
<b>Staging the Question</b>	<p>Pose the compelling question to the class, discuss, and record answers on chart paper.</p> <p>Use a world map (e.g., <a href="#">map of Asia</a>) to show students where Asia is and name and show the different countries that make up the continent.</p> <p>If accessible, use Google Earth to show Asia and zoom in on countries, asking students to share observations related to diversity of landscapes, architecture, urban/rural areas, etc.</p>	
<b>Supporting Question 1</b>	<b>Supporting Question 2</b>	<b>Supporting Question 3</b>
What can names teach us?	What can food teach us?	How can the accomplishments of Asian Americans inspire us?
<b>Formative Performance Task</b>	<b>Formative Performance Task</b>	<b>Formative Performance Task</b>
<p>When analyzing images, have students complete a chart (adapted from <a href="#">Library of Congress</a>) - I see, I think, I wonder/observe, I reflect (connections to self/others/past learning experiences), I question</p> <p>Venn Diagram with Korean culture/Yunhei</p>	<p>Students complete a captioned drawing of themselves sharing a meal with a character from one of the books. Be sure they label their meal with dishes from the stories (e.g., pho, kimchi jjigae).</p> <p>Be sure to treat this question as a subsection of the much broader investigation into Asian Americans. Emphasize with students that food is one part of culture, but there is much more to explore.</p> <p><i>Extension:</i> Create a captioned drawing or written description of how you would stand up for a friend whose food was made fun of in the cafeteria.</p>	<p>In small groups, students present information on the individuals they learned about in various formats (written, drawing, acting).</p>

Featured Sources		Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p>Images of life in Korea and Vietnam</p> <p><i>A Kid's Book About Anti-Asian Hate</i> (Pham, 2021)</p> <p><i>The Name Jar</i> (Choi, 2003)</p>		<p><i>The Pho Team</i> (Do Zuniga, 2020)</p> <p><i>Hot Hot Roti for Dadaji</i> (Zia, 2011)</p> <p><a href="#">Min Jee's Lunch</a> (Kleinrock, 2020)</p>	<p><i>The Story of Olympic Diver Sammy Lee</i> (Yoo, 2020)</p> <p>Articles and books for young readers about Tammy Duckworth (see Appendix)</p> <p>Articles and books for young readers about Kamala Harris (see Appendix)</p> <p><a href="#">Shang-chi</a> (Marvel book), available at (see Appendix)</p> <p>The story of rock climber Ashima Shiraishi: <i>How to Solve a Problem: The rise (and falls) of a rock-climbing champion</i> (Shiraishi &amp; Xiao, 2020)</p>
Summative Performance Task	<b>Argument</b>	Revisit the compelling question with evidence from the series of performance tasks (various formats welcome).	
	<b>Extension</b>	Create a captioned drawing or written description of standing up to anti-Asian hate.	
Taking Informed Action	Write a class letter to a respected adult or local elected official sharing what the students have learned, particularly highlighting the contributions of Asian Americans in your school/community.		

**Appendix B: Non-fiction Books on Asian Countries**

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- Go here for a list of travel books by country: <https://kidstravelbooks.com/destinations/>



### Appendix C: Resources for Images of Asian Culture and Geography\*

#### Korea

- <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/south-korea>
- <https://www.britannica.com/place/Korea>
- <https://www.koreanculture.org/korea-information-culture-and-the-arts>

#### India

- <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/india>
- <https://www.britannica.com/place/India>
- <https://www.india.gov.in/topics/art-culture>
- <https://www.splendidtable.org/bio/vikas-khanna> (food and recipes)

#### Vietnam

- <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/vietnam>
- <https://www.britannica.com/place/Vietnam>
- <https://vietnamdiscovery.com/culture-arts/>
- <https://www.vickypham.com> (food and recipes)

\*Note: This obviously is not an exhaustive list of Asian countries or websites. Rather, this list is to accompany the image analysis in Supporting Question 1 of the inquiry plan.

### Appendix D: Articles and Books on Accomplished Asian Americans

- Yoo, P. (2020). *The Story of Olympic Diver Sammy Lee*. Lee and Low Publishers.

Articles and books for young readers about Tammy Duckworth:

- Article: Senator Tammy Duckworth: Living with no limits!
- Stutman, M. (2018, August 23). Senator Tammy Duckworth - Living with No Limits! *InspireMyKids*. <https://inspiremykids.com/senator-tammy-duckworth-living-with-no-limits/>.
- Books from Great Asian Americans series: *Tammy Duckworth*.
  - Cham, S. (2018). *Tammy Duckworth* (Ser. Great Asian Americans). Capstone Press.
  - Book from Groundbreaking Women in Politics series: *Tammy Duckworth*
  - Jopp, K. (2020). *Tammy Duckworth* (Ser. Groundbreaking Women in Politics). Focus Readers.

Articles and books for young readers about Kamala Harris:

- Harris, K. (2019). *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey (Young Readers)*. Philomel Books.
- Grimes, N., & Freeman, L. (2021). *Kamala Harris: rooted in justice*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Newsela: Kamala Harris' Vice President-Elect Acceptance Speech. (10 Nov 2020). Famous Speeches: Kamala Harris' vice president-elect acceptance speech, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.10.20
- Newsela: LA Times. (10 May 2021). Kamala Harris was inspired by her progressive Indian grandfather. *Los Angeles Times*, adapted by Newsela staff on 5.10.21 Shang-chi, Marvel superhero
- Chen, M. (2021). *Shang-Chi* (Little Golden Book). Penguin Random House.
- Available at: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/651873/shang-chi-little-golden-book-marvel-by-michael-chen-illustrated-by-golden-books/>
- Shiraishi, A., & Xiao, Y. (2020). *How to solve a problem: the rise (and falls) of a rock-climbing champion*. Make Me a World.