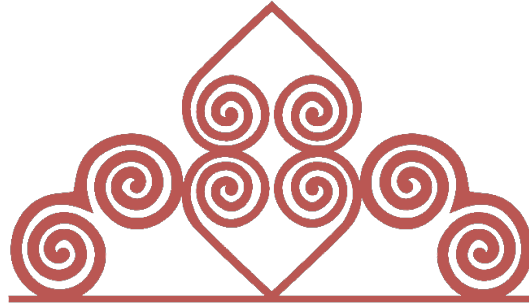




Hmong Culture & Literacy Series

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A Brief Overview of the Hmong

The Hmong are an ethnic group spread across southern China (where they are classified as part of the Miao people), Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Their history is quite complicated, with persecution in China dating back to the 17th century and ongoing migration in the time since (Hein, 2006). Such persecution mythically deprived the Hmong of their written language, which has gone on to create problems with overall literacy and education level, as well as recording Hmong history and culture. The Hmong came into particular relevance to the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, at which point the United States army utilized Hmong soldiers to fight the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops. By the end of U.S. engagement in the area, more than 17,000 Hmong soldiers had died fighting alongside the Americans, and yet the Hmong survivors were left in enemy territory with a very limited escape plan. Only around 2,000 Hmong were evacuated to the United States at that time, and little was done to support the Hmong left in Laos and Vietnam after. Ultimately, over 100,000 Hmong fled the region to refugee camps and other nations (including the United States).

As of 2019, there were around 327,000 ethnic Hmong in the United States (Budiman, 2021). Despite the passing of the Hmong Veterans Naturalization Act (HVNA) in 2000, which allowed Hmong veterans to bypass some of the citizenship requirements for refugees, the Hmong Americans have not entirely forgiven the United States for the status as refugees in the first place. If anything, this effort seems to be too little, too late, and demonstrates the Hmong's ethnic solidarity in pushing for this legislation more than the U.S. government's sense of responsibility. Indeed, Hmong seem to reap few of the benefits that other Asian immigrants enjoy. Hmong have lower education rates and higher than average poverty rates, both

compared to Asian immigrants and the U.S. population as a whole, including lower average income, literacy, and home ownership (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

There are several Hmong population hubs across the United States, the largest being in Minnesota, but we will focus on the Hmong population in the northern suburbs of Denver, including Westminster, Thornton, and Broomfield. As of the 2015 population estimate by the Census Bureau, there were around 3,939 Hmong in Colorado, mostly in the aforementioned region.

Population Needs

The Hmong American Partnership (HAP), based in Saint Paul Minnesota, offers insight its community. This organization seeks to empower the Hmong diaspora and improve the lives of individuals and families through Hmong heritage and culture. It lists its key impact areas as the following:

Workforce Development: helping the community “navigate and adapt to the American job market,” with programs such as English education and job placement.

Economic and Community Development: developing community economic strength with investment, housing assistance, and commercial ventures.

Children and Family Services: connecting children with their cultural identity and helping families connect with basic resources in times of crisis.

Health and Wellness: providing education about health through health insurance enrollment, mental health and drug services, and diabetes programming.

This organization provides a useful framework for programs across the country, but it is also essential to survey the Colorado population. As there is little data unique to the region, surveys

will be essential to fully understanding this population. However, there is some benefit to looking at similar populations around the country. By understanding what a larger community needs, we can compare Colorado-based data against other strategies to create meaningful impact.

As noted earlier, there is no native Hmong script. There are a few writing systems that have sprung up since the 1950s, though each is not without their controversy (Michaud, 2020). This is further complicated by the fact that many younger Hmong don't speak the same language as their parents, and as such may feel alienated from their culture (Xiong, 2019). The Reference Librarian Vang Vang of California State University at Fresno (2014) notes that many Hmong in Laos worked in agriculture and did not need to attend school. As Hmong has no native script, these farmers were then also illiterate. This is to say that many adult Hmong are still unable to read or write, and that their children may be the first generation to attend formal schooling. "[My parents] never took me to the library for Story time or to check out any reading materials because there was no such thing as 'free books' or libraries where they grew up," she writes, going on to explain that many older Hmong are unfamiliar with the concept of libraries or the resources they offer. "Public library programs [are] designed to help immigrants...However, the services are not publicized to the Hmong diaspora through their local media," Vang laments, and as such, well intentioned services largely miss this population. In some ways, it seems that the Hmong's tight knit community prevents the access of new information, as the community seems to already have all the answers needed.

Connecting with a local Hmong organization, such as the Hmong American Association of Colorado (HMAAC), would provide some insight into the community's needs. To start with,

this organization knows its base best and may also offer local contacts for focus groups and in-depth surveys. This community is informationally isolated, so working with their key information sources is essential. The HMAAC can then also help to promote library activities with the Hmong residents through native platforms. It is for this reason that it is important to present a Hmong-centered program that is mutually beneficial.

The Hmong Culture and Literacy Series

One program cannot address all Hmong diaspora needs, but it can help to develop a bridge between residents and the library. If this program is a success, we hope to expand its scope to address other wants and needs in the community. The first step in working with the Hmong diaspora is to make it aware of the library and its services in a way that is both approachable and demonstrates benefit. By partnering with the HMAAC, the Westminster Public Library will be able to reach parts of the community which may otherwise be inaccessible.

Parents and children are our biggest priority for this series, which will focus on Hmong cultural preservation and literacy. Our research indicates that children may be alienated from their parents' culture, and adults in the community have expressed concern that their stories will be forgotten if they are not written down (Kang, 1994). This program will offer a series of written, and to some extent, spoken, language instruction lessons appropriate for both adults and children. As mentioned in the previous section, there is no standardized Hmong written script, and as such, which script is taught may cause some controversy. While one may argue that it is not the most loyal to the Hmong identity due to its Romanized characters, Ntawv

Thoob Teb (the Romanized Popular Alphabet) is the most used Hmong script in the United States, and as such, provides the greatest benefit to the Hmong diaspora (Poser, 1994).

This program series will be held biweekly during the summer to allow for more students to attend. As the Westminster Public Library is a central location among the Hmong populated suburbs, it should be accessible to those interested, but we hope to communicate with the HMAAC so that they can coordinate a carpool if needed, as this is outside of the library's influence. The lessons will be held during a weekday afternoon so that parents will be able to work during the day and take limited time away for the lessons. Patrons can expect to take one hour, twice a month, for the lessons between June and August. By the end of the series, patrons will be able to read simple books on their own. Because much of the community is entirely illiterate in written Hmong, the initial lesson will start from the basic alphabet. In this lesson, younger students may have an easier time, as the Romanized alphabet would be familiar from American education. However, older students are likely to speak Hmong better, and as such are likely to understand the material better. This will be a delicate balance between reading ability and language skills that we hope will encourage cooperation between the groups.

As part of the program, the Westminster Public Library will obtain several Hmong language or bilingual books, with an emphasis on children's books. Hmong cartoonist and illustrator Duachaka Her has gathered a collection of Hmong children's books that may serve as an initial order list for this program (2018). These books feature a variety of reading levels and language skills to encourage ongoing reading. Furthermore, many of these books feature Hmong cultural and historical stories, which will help to connect students with their culture in

an approachable way. The instructor will make note of cultural importance in the story as needed.

The lesson will review one book during the program time, which will be projected with additional material on a larger screen and allow patrons to check out other books from the collection to be returned for the next lesson. This will allow patrons to follow along with one book and ensure the same material is covered for everyone and encourage at-home practice with other materials. Each week will cover a different book of a similar, but perhaps slightly more challenging, reading level. These books will be selected by the instructor and put on hold prior to the lesson. During the lesson, the instructor will read aloud or trade off with students as reading skills improve. Each page will allow time for questions or comments. The instructor will also ask students questions regarding the story to confirm reading comprehension. The instructor will create a comfortable and supportive learning environment so that students of all ages will feel encouraged to read aloud.

Barriers

The Romanized Popular Alphabet is not the preferred written script among *all* Hmong, especially those from outside the United States. While a controversial choice in some regards, it is also the most practical. RPA is the Hmong script most used in the United States and on the internet and has the largest selection of children's books available. This script selection may be revised if there is sufficient pushback from patrons, or if the HMAAC has an alternate recommendation.

Because the Hmong population in Colorado is only around 4,000, the library will need to sign off on what is likely to be a small lesson. While we hope for enough popularity to

bring in students from around the region, and hopefully even non-Hmong students, this is a unique program with limited historical program reference points. It is very much a pilot program that will need to be adjusted as it progresses, depending on reading ability, interest, and other factors. We will rely on the HMAAC to introduce the program to its community, as much of the community is unfamiliar with libraries. We will also need to find other ways to promote the program. We hope to work with a volunteer from the HMAAC but will need to purchase the books for the program and ensure that sufficient reading materials are available for the lessons. Hmong language books are often not carried by larger publishers, making them more difficult to find and purchase.

Program Assessment

Upon completion of the program, we will assess its success and determine the program's future. Success indicators include attendance and reading level by the end of the program. Additional interest in the lessons from those not currently attending may also suggest that the program should be repeated. At the end of the program, we will review with the instructor regarding their assessment of the program to confirm that they felt it was valuable. Because this is a literacy program, distributing written surveys may face some challenges, so we will interview some of the students about their experience with the lessons.

Most importantly, we will review the number of Hmong-focused books are checked out and the number of new library cards from this population group. This will inform whether the students found both the program and the library accessible and valuable. Our key goal is to encourage Hmong readers to utilize the Westminster Public Library's services and provide the resources they need. Should the program be deemed a success, we hope to expand Hmong-

focused programs into workforce development and cultural events, such as Hmong arts and holidays.

Budgeting

The instruction will be provided by the HMAAC, leaving book resources as the key expense for this program. We anticipate that we will need at least 20 new Hmong books for this program and for the library, and budget \$25.00 per book. This brings the book budget to \$500.00. The other materials needed for this program are already available in the Westminster Public Library, including a private space to hold the lesson, as well as a screen on which to project the book for lessons. Additional lesson costs include black and white lesson worksheets (Appendix B), for which we budget \$15.00. We will promote the program on the website and on social media but anticipate that most marketing exposure will come through the HMAAC. We will distribute full-color flyers to the association, adding another \$10.00 to the budget. This brings the program's budget total to \$525.00.

Conclusion

The Westminster Public Library is a resource for the entire community, and that includes populations that do not currently utilize it. To serve the Hmong community, it needs to understand what the Hmong need, why they do not currently utilize the library, and how the library can improve their lives. The Hmong Culture and Literacy Series is just the first step in addressing Hmong needs and helping them to preserve their language and culture. It will introduce this otherwise unserved community to the library and its services while providing a means to improve literacy and community connections. Upon the success of this program, we

hope to work further with the Hmong American Association of Colorado to create new, relevant events for this population and increase library usage.

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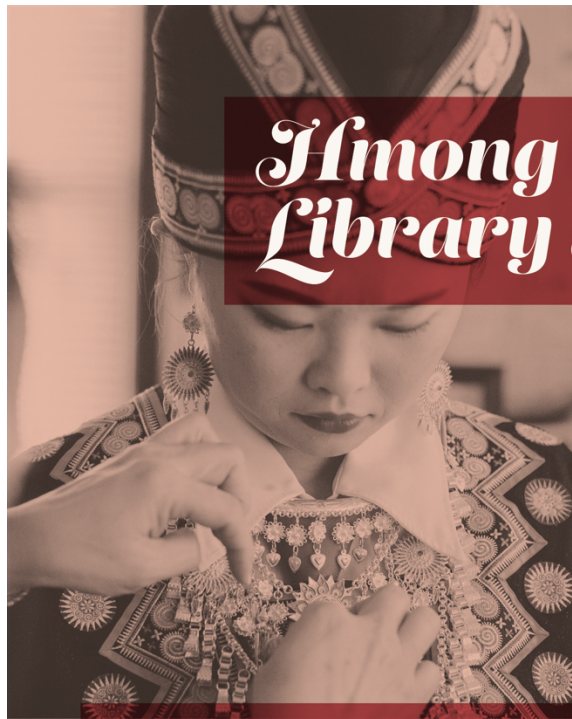
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[<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=hmong%20colorado&tid=ACSDT5YSPT2015.B01003>].

Vang, V. (2004, March). Public library services to the Hmong-American community: much room for improvement. *Library & Information Science Research*, 14(1), 2nd ser. Retrieved November 07, 2021, from <http://www.libres-ejournal.info/891/>

Appendix A: Annotated Bibliography



Hmong Refugee Library Services

HOW PUBLIC LIBRARIES CAN ADDRESS TRAUMA, LITERACY, AND HEALTH

REFUGEE RESOURCES

Im, H., Rodriguez, C., & Grumbine, J. M. (2020). A multitier model of refugee mental health and psychosocial support in resettlement: Toward trauma-informed and culture-informed systems of care. *Psychological Services*, 18(3), 345–364. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000412>

In order to better address refugee mental health, the multiplier mental health and psychosocial support model finds the gaps in refugee resettlement program support and provides trauma- and culture-informed care.

Koerber, J. (2018). *Library services for immigrants and new Americans: celebration and integration*. Libraries Unlimited.

This book provides a practical guide to providing meaningful services to immigrants. Such programs build a community and provide the resources for both success and comfort for immigrants and refugees in their new homes.

Kosciejew, M. (2019). Information's Importance for Refugees: Information Technologies, Public Libraries, and the Current Refugee Crisis. *The Library Quarterly (Chicago)*, 89(2), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1086/702193>

Marc Kosciejew outlines some of refugees' unique needs and suggests that public libraries support refugees' human rights by providing access to information, communication, and resources, and they help to build trust and support within the community.

Lloyd, A. (2017). Researching fractured (information) landscapes: Implications for library and information science researchers undertaking research with refugees and forced migration studies. *Journal of Documentation*, 73(1), 35–47. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-03-2016-0032>

Annemaree Lloyd notes little attention is paid to refugee information experiences, and as such, libraries, though positioned as safe spaces for refugees, are often poorly prepared to handle the unique needs of forced migrants. To better serve these users, libraries must first consider the fractured landscape from which refugees come and dedicate time and resources developing specific strategies for aiding them.

Rodriguez, S. (2019). "We're building the community; it's a hub for democracy.": Lessons learned from a library-based, school-district partnership and program to increase belonging for newcomer immigrant and refugee youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 102, 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.04.025>

The Hartford Public School District and Hartford Public Library created a partnership designed to understand the experiences of migrant youths and help them develop spaces of belonging in the community by creating support networks.

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Allen, M., Matthew, S., & Boland, M. J. (2004). Working with immigrant and refugee populations: issues and Hmong case study. *Library Trends*, 53(2), 301–328.

Refugees have unique health information needs that need to be specifically addressed in a culturally and linguistically sensitive way to ensure effective communication.



Goodkind, J. R. (2006). Promoting Hmong Refugees' Well-Being Through Mutual Learning: Valuing Knowledge, Culture, and Experience. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 37(1), 77–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-005-9003-6>

Refugees resettling in another country face several hurdles, not limited to trauma, lack of community, discrimination, and isolation. The Refugee Well-Being Project was developed to help Hmong refugees thrive, and to address specific issues within the community, such as women's issues.

Kang, H.-W. (1994). *The Development and Study of Hmong Literacy: Ensuring the Future and Preserving the Past*. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.

Hee-Won Kang's 1993 survey investigated the overall literacy of adult Hmong immigrants and found that Hmong culture impacted the way in which the immigrants interacted with information. This survey found that visual cues were very important for this community, and that community cooperation was a key aspect of learning among Hmong students.

Khuu, B. P., Lee, H. Y., & Zhou, A. Q. (2018). Health Literacy and Associated Factors Among Hmong American Immigrants: Addressing the Health Disparities. *Journal of Community Health*, 43(1), 11–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-017-0381-0>

This study demonstrates that Hmong refugees have low health literacy, which may lead to increased poor physical and mental health in the community.

Michaud, J. (2020). The Art of Not Being Scripted So Much: The Politics of Writing Hmong Language(s). *Current Anthropology*, 61(2), 240–263. <https://doi.org/10.1086/708143>

As Jean Michaud notes, the Hmong do not have a common script for their language, nor do they have one specific region to call their own. This adds complexity to written histories of the Hmong people, as any scripts crafted for them carry a great deal of baggage, from Christian missionaries to Chinese oppression.

Xiong, K. Y. (2019). *The Disappearing Hmong Language: The Effects of English on Hmong Children's Heritage Language and Their Relationship with Their Parents*. [Ed.D. Dissertation, University of Colorado at Denver]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Khang Yang Xiong's dissertation notes the specific struggles faced by the Hmong community in the United States, not limited to financial, education, and language frustrations. As Hmong youth assimilate, their familiarity with the Hmong language falls away, and with it, connection to their culture and families.



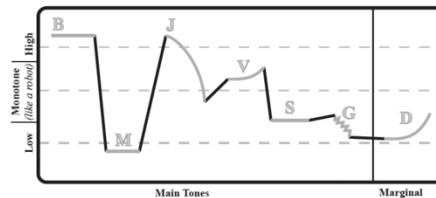
Appendix B: Sample Worksheet

**KOJ PUAS YOG KUV TUE ME AB?**

los ntawm Kathleen Rizzi

ARE YOU MY BABY? by Kathleen Rizzi

Mark the tones on
the sentences below:



“Koj puas yog kuv tus me ab?”
tus txiv aub nug.



“Tsis yog!”
tus nees txuam nqov.



“Yog!”
tus menyuam aub tom tom.

Circle the consonants,
and underline vowels on these words:

AUB**NEES****VUJ****QIJ**

How do you write:

dog _____

donkey _____

puppy _____

yes _____

no _____