

Classroom Guide for
DIA'S STORY CLOTH
The Hmong People's
Journey of Freedom
 by **Dia Cha**
 stitched by
Chue and Nhia Thao Cha

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-6

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.5/.5

Lexile Measure®: 1050

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 4.2

Themes

War, Freedom, Immigration, Hmong Americans, Southeast Asia

Synopsis

"Hmong means Free People..."

DIA CHA's story is shared by many Hmong Americans who made a long journey to freedom. As told through the story cloth stitched by her aunt and uncle, the Hmong people's search for freedom began long ago in China and continued as they settled in Southeast Asia. With the onset of the Vietnam War, many Hmong, who fought with the Americans, were forced from their villages in the highlands of Laos. After the war, they embarked on the dangerous flight to refugee camps in Thailand. Many families spent years in the camps before eventual resettlement abroad.

For centuries needlework has been part of Hmong culture. But it has only been within the last two decades that "story cloths" emerged as a way for the Hmong to keep their stories alive.

For the Hmong people, story cloths are a bridge between past and present. For all Americans, *Dia's Story Cloth* is a universal story of the search for freedom.

Background

Dia Cha and her family's escape to the United States is a story that is shared by many Hmong Americans. The name "Hmong" (Pronounced "Mong") translates as "Free People."

In 1976, under the auspices of world relief organizations, the first Hmong refugee families came from Laos and Thailand to the United States. The Hmong had been known throughout Southeast Asia for their exquisite needlework. Soon after arriving in the United States, their "flower cloth," or pa'ndau (pronounced "pan-dow") began to appear at local community fairs. This striking needlework soon came to distinguish the approximately 125,000 Hmong Americans.

For 100 years the Hmong grew crops, raised pigs and chickens, stitched flower cloth tales, and lived a family-centered existence in their remote villages. But the peace was shattered in the late 1950s when the Hmong were forced to take sides in the guerrilla warfare in Laos. Some Hmong sided with the Royal Laos government backed by the United States, with other Hmong sided with the Communist Pathert Lao nationalists supported by North Vietnamese and the Soviet Union. General Vang Pao led a Hmong army financed and trained by the American Central Intelligence Agency. In this "secret war" in Laos, thousands of Hmong men and boys were recruited by the CIA to help with rescue missions and other guerrilla operations. Hmong families were forced to hide in the jungle as the Pathet Lao invaded their villages from the ground while the CIA bombed their villages from the air. About 40,000 Lao Hmong lost their lives in the fighting.

In 1975, when the Royal Lao government fell and the United States withdrew from its northern Laos airfield command center, the Hmong allies were left in a desperate situation—some say they were abandoned to the killing fields of the Pathet Lao. Thousand of displaced survivors made their way to the Mekong River and hazarded the dangerous crossing by raft or floats to refuge in Thailand. Detained in refugee camps maintained by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the people lived minimally in multi-family, barracks-like buildings.

The people tried to live normally in the camps in Thailand. Time was heavy and many stories were told—of the "origins of the Free People," of better days in the mountain villages, and of recent trauma and flight. Fortunately, their strong narrative tradition and artistic needlework skill found new means of expression. Drawn by men and embroidered by women to document Hmong legends, lifeways, and experiences, story cloths are both family heirlooms and collectible folk art.

Dia's Story Cloth is an outstanding example of this new textile art form. A double bed-sized piece of gray commercial cotton cloth is the foundation. On it, Dia's uncle, Nhia Thao Chia, drew figures and scenes of Hmong history, life, and war, and the escape. His wife Chue used chain, feather, satin, and cross stitches to render the hundreds of animals, plants, people, houses, and events. Their stories grew to fill the cloth and document the Hmong journey.

Awards & Reviews

"Pick of the Lists," *American Bookseller*

"Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)

"A folk art masterpiece." —*Publishers Weekly*

"One of the most poignant, beautifully told family histories. This book brings alive the Hmong story as never seen before."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"A moving book... an epic story." —*Hungry Mind Review*

Please see our Web site, for an update-to-date, complete listing of awards and reviews at:
<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/dia.html>

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

1. Look at the cover of the book and discuss the illustration and title.
2. Have students predict what the story might be about.

3. Ask students what they know about the Hmong people—look at the illustration for more information e.g. clothing, activities, habitat.

Using the KWL (what we Know, what we Want to know, and what we Learned) strategy, the teacher can help scaffold students' prior knowledge, formulate guided reading questions, and synthesize what was learned from reading the story. Using the chart below, record students' brainstorm on what they know about the story under the first column of "What we Know." Elicit from students questions they have about the story e.g. Who are the Hmong people? Where did they come from? Why did they leave for freedom? Where did they go to? What was their journey like? Record their questions under the second column in the chart, "What we Want to know." After reading the story, record students' response to their own questions under the third column, "What we Learned."

| What we know | What we want to know | What we learned |
|--------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | | |

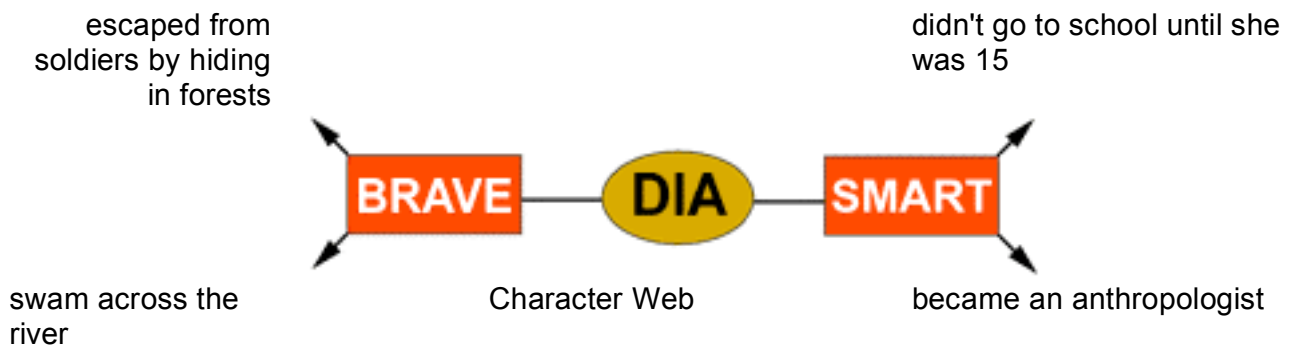
KWL chart

During reading

1. Teacher may choose to read aloud, pair low readers with better readers, or allow students to read independently, using the questions generated during KWL to guide their reading.
2. Students can put post it notes on pages where there are words or passages that they cannot figure out. These words and passages can be discussed with the group after the first reading of the story.

AFTER READING ACTIVITIES

1. Teacher elicit response to the story with open ended questions e.g. What do you think of the story? Did you like the story? Why? What did you think of Dia's experiences? What do you think of Dia?
2. The teacher may want to make a web of students' description of Dia, and their justification of their opinions. This can serve as an outline of a paragraph for a written description about Dia later on.



1. Look at the questions generated from the KWL activity. Elicit answers from students for the posed questions. Have students refer to the pages where they found their answers. You may ask students to read the part on the page where the answers can be found.
2. Record answers under the column "What we Learned" in KWL chart. Add to this column additional information students have to offer regarding what they learned from the story.
3. Some possible writing activities:
 - Write about what you think of Dia, using the character web
 - Write about what you learned about Hmong people using notes from the KWL chart
 - Pretend you are Dia, write why you decided to write this story about the story cloth.
 - Write a letter to Dia

Word Study

1. Discuss words that students volunteer that they have trouble with. Make a list of these words. Look at the root, prefix, suffix of each word to help students understand the word's meaning. Look for chunks in a word that fit in with a word family or rhyming pattern to help students learn how to pronounce the word.
2. Add the new words to the classroom's Word Wall for further activities.

Supportive activities for English Language Learners and At Risk students:

1. Build prior knowledge using pictures, maps
2. Build interest by introducing a Hmong guest (a student, a person in the community), or have other immigrant students talk about their journey to America.
3. Anticipate unknown vocabulary e.g. Communist, regime, recruit, province, guerrilla, anthropologist, vivid; introduce these vocabulary through group discussion prior to reading.
4. Use illustration and title to help students anticipate what the story is about.
5. Teacher may read aloud text to the students, or pair an English Language Learner or a poor reader with a better reader to read the story.
6. After reading the story, reinforce /clarify the story by diagraming the story, or draw a time line.
7. Students can act out the story.
8. Give students a story frame to help them write their own summary of the story.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

In order to integrate students' reading experiences with other subject areas, you might want to have students complete some of these activities.

Social Studies

1. Look at a map of Asia, trace migration of Hmong people from China to other South east Asian countries.

2. Learn more about the Hmong people by looking up resources listed under Bibliography in *Dia's Story Cloth*.
3. Be a cultural anthropologist by tracing your family's family tree to find out who in your family immigrated to this country and why.
4. Interview an immigrant to this country and find out why this person come to this country, and what his or her journey was like.

Art

1. American quilts often tells a family history. Visit a museum where quilts are displayed or look at books about quilts to see what you can learn about the history of quilts. See if there are any similarities between what you learned about the story cloth and the quilts on display.
2. Pretend you are making a story cloth of your family. Instead of sewing the pictures to illustrate what you want to share about your family, draw pictures to retell your story on a big piece of poster paper. Or you may cut out pictures and glue them on a poster paper - a collage of your family story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE STORY CLOTH

Dia Cha was born in Laos. In 1975 she fled with her family to Thailand, where they spent over four years in the Ban Vinai refugee camp before gaining entry to the United States. Although she didn't start school until she was 15 years old, in 1992 she became one of the first Hmong American women to earn an advanced degree: a master's in applied anthropology from Northern Arizona University. She works as a cultural anthropologist in Boulder, Colorado, and is co-author of *Folk Stories of the Hmong*, *Dia's Story Cloth* is her first book for young readers.

Dia's aunt and uncle, **Chue and Nhia Thao Cha**, made this story cloth in 1990 in the Chiang Kham refugee camp in Thailand. They have since returned to Laos.

Resources on the Web

For reviews, awards and related web links for *Dia's Story Cloth* visit:
<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/dia.html>

View other **Active Reader Classroom Guides** at: <http://www.leeandlow.com/teachers>

Book Information

\$7.95, PAPERBACK

ISBN 978-1-880000-63-2

\$16.95, HARDCOVER

ISBN 978-1-880000-34-2

32 pages, 8-3/8" x 11"

Interest Level: Grades 1-6

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.5/.5

Lexile Measure®: 1050

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 4.2

Themes: War, Freedom, Immigration, Hmong Americans, Southeast Asia

Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/order> (general order information)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

212-683-3591 fax

By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, NY NY 10016

Copyright © 1997-2007 The Active Learner
Lee & Low Books, all rights reserved.
For questions, comments and/or more information
please contact us at info@leeandlow.com