

## Linking Hmong Culture and Children's Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Culturally authentic children's literature books can help develop students' understanding of different cultures and the diversity within their own classrooms. In the La Crosse area, this diversity includes a growing number of Hmong families. However, there are only a few Hmong children's books that provide students with an accurate cultural perspective. To address this concern, our research developed ten cultural facts that will be embedded into the Hmong bilingual children's book, *Ka's Garden*. Through interviews and survey methodologies, we validated these facts in order to provide students and the community with accurate information about Hmong history, culture, and traditions that are aligned with the storyline of this book.

### INTRODUCTION

Literature can be a powerful educational tool in the classroom. Research has shown that linking children's literature with content areas increases positive attitudes and interest in core subject areas (Castle & Needham, 2007; Sackes, Trundle, & Flevares, 2009). By integrating subject matter with "quality multicultural literature, students' language skills and students' appreciation of cultural differences are enlarged and enriched" (St. Amour, 2003, p. 47). Culturally authentic children's books can also provide students with the opportunity to enhance cross-cultural understanding through the development of perspectives different than their own (Morgan, 2009). In particular, children's books that represent people from diverse backgrounds have been shown to reduce misunderstandings and stereotypes students have towards minority groups, as well as provide minority students with positive role models (Russell, 2008).

Research has also shown students are more engaged in learning when they see themselves reflected in the literature they are reading (Mitchell, 2002). In the Greater La Crosse area, 14% of the student population is Hmong, yet children's literature with characters of Hmong descent is lacking. To fill this void, the purpose of this undergraduate research project was to expand upon an ongoing collaborative effort to create a culturally appropriate children's book that realistically depicts the Hmong culture and language. To be included in this bilingual book, *Ka's Garden* written by Maggie Lee McHugh, a series of culturally appropriate facts was identified in order to connect the reader to the storyline. The intent of these cultural facts was to enhance the understanding of Hmong culture in the La Crosse area, as well as provide Hmong parents and students with a culturally appropriate book. These facts will be published in both the book and the accompanying Teacher's Resource Manual.

*Ka's Garden* focuses on gardening practices learned by a Hmong girl in Laos. This young girl, Ka, discovers the importance of plants and animals, specifically how both plants and animals are needed for all living things to grow and survive. Through a series of events, the number of plants in Ka's garden slowly dwindles as animals such as chickens and tigers eat her vegetables. Ka's *niam* or mother shares her family's words of wisdom about the circle of life put in place by the creator. These words remind Ka that every plant, animal, and human has a purpose and responsibility to care for all living things. Thus the story concludes, "That's why we must watch carefully everything the creator has created so we can live our Hmong life forever."

### METHOD

To begin researching cultural facts for *Ka's Garden*, we reviewed the current literature on Hmong history and culture to construct a series of questions that would be utilized in the data collection process. Aligning with the events in the children's literature book, ten questions were written and validated as culturally relevant by Hmong elders in the local community. These questions were clustered into four categories: Hmong History, Hmong Families, Hmong Animal Traditions, and Hmong Gardening. Questions pertaining to the Hmong History included where the Hmong people lived prior to coming to the United States and why they came to the United States. Hmong

Families questions were related to the traditional roles of the family and cultural beliefs. Aligned with the children's storyline, questions relating to Hmong Animal Traditions included the types and uses of common animals by Hmong people. Hmong Gardening questions included both the type of crop and main food sources in Laos. The list of questions can be found in the RESULTS section.

This project utilized two methods of qualitative data collection including interviews and surveys. Multiple sources of data were collected to allow for the triangulation of data across both data collection methods (Creswell, 2005). Both the interviews and the survey utilized the ten cultural questions, which were written in both English and Hmong. Interviews were conducted with seven Hmong individuals from the La Crosse area. Each of the interviews was recorded in Hmong and transcribed in both Hmong and English. The participants were purposefully chosen to provide a wide spectrum of past experiences and knowledge. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 70 years old. Their collective experiences included witnessing the Vietnam War, living in refugee camps in Laos, immigrating to the United States, and being educated in the local K-12 public school and university systems. The survey was administered to fourteen highly respected elders identified by the La Crosse Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (HMAA). The mission of the HMAA is to act as an educational organization to help Hmong people transition to the United States. The results of the surveys were also transcribed in both Hmong and English.

In order to formulate culturally accurate answers into ten cultural facts for the children's book, we systematically examined the transcriptions of both sources of data to identify common themes. Employing content analysis techniques outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), we coded the transcriptions in order to identify common themes for each of the ten questions. As an example, we used the theme *Safety* as a summary to the cultural question: How/why did the Hmong people end up in the mountains of Laos/Thailand? This is reflective in the survey response "*Since the Chinese had killed and pushed the Hmong out, Hmong people had to leave to wherever they feel the safest for their family*". These themes were further validated through Hmong reference books and discussions with Hmong elders at the HMAA.

## RESULTS

The end product of this research was a collection of ten cultural facts that will be included in the bilingual Hmong children's literature book, *Ka's Garden*. These cultural facts included the examination of the history, family life, animal traditions, and gardening techniques used by the Hmong people. In order to summarize the results for each of the ten cultural questions from our qualitative data analysis, we chose to use the following framework. The summary of each of the four cultural categories includes a reproduction of the artwork from the children's book to aid in understanding as depicted in Figures 1 through 4. This artwork was created by art major Vang Lao, a December 2009 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Tables 1 through 4 include the cultural questions followed by a transcribed selection from one of the seven interviews. Finally, we generalized the results of the interviews and surveys for each question in the form of a two to three sentence summary.



**Figure 1.** Artwork depicting a Hmong house

**Table 1.** Summary of the Hmong History cultural facts

<b>Question 1</b>	Where did the Hmong people originate from?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Nyob Sauv Teb khiav los rau teb chaws Nplog.</i> From China to Laos
<b>Cultural Fact 1</b>	As far as we know, based on research and talking to elders, Hmong people originated from China thousands of years ago. Other theories have shown that Hmong people originated from the Middle East and Europe.
<b>Question 2</b>	How/why did the Hmong people end up in the mountains of Laos/Thailand?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Peb tsis paub ntaub paub ntawv ces peb mus nyob nram nroog tsis paub nrhiav noj nrhiav haus.</i> We do not have education backgrounds, so if we live in the cities we do not know how to survive.
<b>Cultural Fact 2</b>	Hmong people used to isolate themselves in the hills of Laos away from cities because they liked to be independent, farm, and raise animals.
<b>Question 3</b>	How long did it take to build a house for your family back in Laos/Thailand?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Peb yeej npaj li ob hlis mus rau peb hlis peb thiaj npaj tau, rau qhov nws muaj yuav mus txiav cov ntoo, hlais cov nqeeb los vov. Yuav mus phua cov ntoo los xov. Peb hlis yoq qhov sai.</i> It takes us about two to three months to prepare because we have to cut trees and cut grass weeds. We also have to cut the wood for fencing. Three months is considered very fast.
<b>Cultural Fact 3</b>	It takes about three months to one year to prepare materials such as bamboo, long grass weeds, and woods for building a house. It takes one day to one week to build a house depending on commitment and village collaboration.
<b>Question 4</b>	Why did the Hmong people come to the U.S.?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Hnov luag tej laus hais nyab laj tuaj ces Miskas xav kom Hmoob nplog pab Miskas. Kom nais phoo muab nais phoo cov neeg mus pab Miskas. Pab lawv thaiv cov nyab laj hais tias hnuv twg nais phoo lawv yeej ces Mikas yuav tuaj kho peb lub teb chaws yog hais tias Mikas swb, Hmoob swb ces Miska mam lav coj peb tuaj tau teb chaws no.</i> I've heard from elders that for the Vietnam war, Americans wanted Hmong to help. General Vang Pao was asked to gather his people to help the Americans fight the Vietnamese. If the Americans win then they will help the Hmong in Laos; if the Americans lose, then they will bring the Hmong to the United States of America.
<b>Cultural Fact 4</b>	The Hmong people came to the United States because of their involvement in the Vietnam War. There was an agreement between the Hmong and the Americans that if the U.S. lost the war, the Hmong would come to the U.S. as refugees.



**Figure 2.** Artwork depicting a Hmong girl assisting with gardening

**Table 2.** Summary of the Hmong Families cultural facts

<b>Question 5</b>	Why do Hmong families have so many children?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Hmoob tseem tsawg tsawg ces Hmoob xav yug kom Hmoob muaj coob me ntsis tauj thiaj tsis tas li ntawv yog koj tsis muaj me tub me nyuam coob ces koj tsev neej ua noj ua haus los ua tsis tau, liaj teb dav ces koj txom nyem.</i> The Hmong population was small, so they wanted to produce more babies. The more children you have, the larger the harvest.
<b>Cultural Fact 5</b>	Children are important for preserving the family tree and are needed for agricultural labor. Physical labor is important as the bigger the family the larger the harvest.
<b>Question 6</b>	How old were you when you started helping your parents with chores?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Muaj li 8 xyoo ces yus yeej txawj pab niam pab txiv ua teb thiab nyob hauv tsev, pab cov hlob lawv pub qaib pub npua tos niam txiv.</i> At age eight I started to help my mom and dad by staying home and help my older siblings feed the chickens and pigs.
<b>Cultural Fact 6</b>	As early as three years old, Hmong girls start helping their parents with chores such as gardening, babysitting, cooking, cleaning, and feeding farm animals. Whereas Hmong boys start helping out around age eight with chopping firewood, feeding animals, and hunting with their fathers.



**Figure 3.** Artwork depicting a tiger

**Table 3.** Summary of the Hmong Animal Traditions cultural facts

<b>Question 7</b>	Why do Hmong people use chickens for every ritual?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Qhai mas yog ib qho peb Hmoob txoj kev txoj cai yeej mus li ntawv lawm.</i> Hmong have always used chickens for many generations.
<b>Cultural Fact 7</b>	Chickens are used in every Shamanic (religious) ritual because chickens are readily available and not expensive to raise. In rituals, the chicken's body parts are used for soul calling for the sick, to give warnings to family members, and to predict future happenings.
<b>Question 8</b>	Why are tigers resembled as bad spirits?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Peb nyob peb lub teb chaws ces qhov txaus ntshai tshaj plaws. Tsov ces yog qhov ntshai naj npaub ib.</i> In our country tigers are the scariest. Tigers are the number one scariest animals.
<b>Cultural Fact 8</b>	Hmong people fear tigers because they are fierce and strong and have the ability to eat animals and attack humans. Hmong people don't have the tools or weapons to take down tigers.



**Figure 4.** Artwork depicting traditional Hmong garden

**Table 4.** Summary of the Hmong Gardening cultural facts

<b>Question 9</b>	Did you/your family garden all year long?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Yeej ua teb txhua txhua xyoo tsis tau muaj ib xyoos yuav tsis tau ua teb li.</i> We garden every year; there has not been a year we do not garden.
<b>Cultural Fact 9</b>	During the months of January and February, Hmong families are seeking new land to farm. Harvest time is around October and November; from December to January, families take a break from gardening and farming.
<b>Question 10</b>	What was the main food source in Laos/Thailand?
<b>Transcription</b>	<i>Nplej thaib pob kws ob yam no yog yam peb cog ntau tshaj plaws.</i> Rice and corn are the two that we grow the most in our gardens.
<b>Cultural Fact 10</b>	The common food sources in Laos were rice, green mustard, and corn. Even though there was meat, animals were mainly for rituals and for time of crises such as selling off pigs or cows for money.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Throughout the cultural fact interviews, we learned more about ourselves, and our Hmong culture. There were some facts we already knew about, but we wanted further investigate these facts as they corresponded with the story. The cultural fact about tigers we came up with was a myth that we did not know about prior to conducting the interviews with the elders. Overall, we learned about different experiences that our Hmong elders lived. Based on people’s experiences, we received different answers for cultural fact survey. We really enjoyed and found our interviews to be an interesting educational experience.

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