

## *The Latehomecomer* Discussion Questions

1. An overarching theme of *The Latehomecomer* is the use of language to define and preserve one's cultural identity. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, part of the International Bill of Human Rights, recognizes the importance of language as integral to one's identity and therefore bars discrimination based on language. Language-based rights similarly appear in the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, also part of the International Bill of Human Rights. Why is language considered a human right important to protect?
2. The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, another constituent of the International Bill of Human Rights, does not mention language at all except for banning discrimination based on language. How might language be understood as an economic, social, and cultural right? Why didn't the framers provide more language rights in the Covenant? If you were prescribing rights to language, what principles would you specifically include and why?
3. Yang, admitting significant difficulty in speaking English with confidence, mentions that children born to Hmong families in the United States are given American names. What is the significance of the English names? What does it have to do with human rights?
4. Yang's grandmother was a traditional healer, respected and trusted for her abilities. Studies have shown that traditional medicine can be effective in treating or minimizing symptoms of serious diseases. But opponents of traditional medicine say that it gives people a false sense of security, a matter of special concern relative to those who believe they have been successfully treated but still are contagious. What role do you think traditional medicine should play in healthcare? The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides for the human right to health. Should this right embrace a right to traditional medicine and health care? Consider its role in developed countries, compared to that in lesser-developed countries.
5. Part of Yang's aim in writing the memoir was to preserve her family's culture. In your opinion, should governments have an affirmative duty to preserve minority or indigenous cultures? Or merely refrain from acting with deliberate hostility toward a minority culture? How is this a human rights issue?
6. Each of Australia, France, and the United States took Hmong refugees fleeing their homeland in the wake of the Laotian Civil War (1953-75)—also known as the "US Secret War" owing to the major role played by the United States to stop the spread of Vietnamese communism into Laos. Generally speaking, who do

you think has the responsibility to take refugees? According to what criteria? Is this a human rights issue?

7. Yang's family received help from the United Nations in arranging for documentation, refugee camps, and life therein. The U.S. government afforded benefits for disability and welfare. At what point do you think UN assistance should stop? At what point do you think individual government assistance should stop? Should it be particularized to the refugee community's unique needs? What transition program would you design? Are these human rights issues?
8. Despite living in poverty, Yang recalls a happy childhood in the refugee camp. As readers, it is difficult to understand the conditions in which Yang and others lived for many years. What do you think should be the standard of living for a refugee camp? What do you think should be the responsibility of the United Nations and individual governments to ensure such a standard? Are these human rights issues?
9. Some of Yang's family members were able to survive only because they paid to be smuggled across the Mekong River. In the United States, smuggling people into the country is a very serious offense, and punishable by lengthy imprisonment. Smugglers, referred to as "snakeheads" or "coyotes," are seen as opportunists who take advantage of people in desperate situations and with little regard for human life. Can there be such a thing as a legitimate smuggler? Consider the context of refugees fleeing persecution or death, like the Hmong from Laos, who could not escape their country because their government prohibited it. Can we rationalize the role of cross-border smugglers in such circumstances? How might we accommodate them in U.S. law? Is this a human rights issue?
10. Yang reports that she and others like her when transitioning to refugee camps in the United States were "trained" on how to be an American. She describes "flushing toilets" and eating "chicken sandwiches." If you were in charge of designing a curriculum to adjust to life in the United States, what would you include? Would it include teaching that cultural traditions inconsistent with U.S. cultural norms (e.g., the Hmong's different Creation beliefs and practices) or U.S. law (e.g., Yang's family tradition of having girls stop going to school at age 13 to care for family home life) would have to be relinquished? Are these human rights issues?
11. Yang describes a very hostile reception from Americans upon arriving in the United States, such as shouting names or making rude gestures, which made adjustment to the United States unnecessarily difficult. How might we best control ignorant and hateful responses such as these? Should they be criminalized? How do we balance free speech against the right to be free from

hateful acts? Should there be a ban on hate speech? In the U.S.? Worldwide? Are these human rights issues?

12. Yang portrays the American intervention and subsequent withdrawal from Laos as being fair-weathered and inconsistent with the ideology of “spreading democracy” which America embraces. What obligations does a State have to “finish what it started” so to speak? What about regard for the welfare of the people? Is this only justified morally, or could there be a legal justification? Can we draw a parallel to other interventions, such as Iraq? Afghanistan? Are these human rights issues?
13. Yang reminds us of the lack of responsibility assumed by the United States for exploiting the Hmong people during the “U.S. Secret War.” Do you think the U.S. government owes the Hmong people anything? Is citizenship enough? What about basic welfare? What particular services or benefits do you think should be afforded to those granted asylum? Are these human rights issues?
14. Truth and reconciliation commissions have been used in South Africa, Guatemala, and many other countries as a cathartic way for victims of human rights abuse and other violations, in public fora, to help discover and reveal past wrongdoing by a government. Persecutors also can give testimony and ask for amnesty in some cases. Do you think that a truth and reconciliation commission would serve the Hmong community well? Or do you think that they would be better served by a more formal trial of those in charge at the time? Either way, what role do you believe the United States should play in this regard, if any?
15. Yang notes that there is no mention of the Hmong in books or discussion about American history. Why might this be so? Do you think there is an affirmative duty to educate children about the ways in which minority cultures have contributed to the American experience? Adults? Consider a recent law in Arizona that banned schools from teaching “ethnic studies,” and whether this violates the human rights of students. Consider also that most of the Hmong people in the United States would not have come to the United States were it not for the “U.S. Secret War” in Laos.