

**TEACHER BACKGROUND****Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Background**

Between 1890 and 1924, over 20 million newcomers entered the United States, more than in any comparable period in our nation's history. Fleeing poverty and oppression for a better, freer life, many immigrants never forgot their first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. Holding aloft a welcoming torch, she symbolized America's promise. In the words later inscribed at the statue's base, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Emma Lazarus' words mythologized the immigration experience for European immigrants who entered the premier gateway of the East Coast: Ellis Island Immigration Station in New York Harbor.

On the West Coast, from 1910 to 1940, the majority of immigrants arriving in San Francisco received a much chillier reception at the remote, Angel Island Immigration Station. The majority of immigrants crossing the Pacific came from Asia, not Europe. To understand their treatment, we must understand its roots. The majority of newcomers at Angel Island were from China and Japan. Their stories are well documented. Less is known about the relative handful arrived from other countries around the world including the Punjab, Russia, the Philippines, Portugal, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, and Latin America. Their stories remain to be gathered.

**Chinese Immigration from 1849-1882: From the Gold Rush to Exclusion**

In 1849, news that gold had been discovered in California drew hundreds, then thousands of Chinese to the land they called "Gold Mountain." Many of the hopefuls hailed from Guangdong Province in southern China, which had been beset by natural and man-made disasters and by a collapsing rural economy. Over 90% of the 250,000 Chinese who entered the U.S. between 1849 and 1882 came from Guangdong's Pearl River Delta.

Many migrants hoped to work for a few years in the United States and then return to their homeland with a sizeable nest egg. Fortune, however, was elusive, and many sojourners turned into permanent settlers. The 1880 census listed over 100,000 Chinese residing in the U.S.

At first, the Chinese were welcomed as a source of cheap and tractable labor. They built railroads, cleared land and worked in mining and agriculture throughout West. As they became established, they sought higher wages and their successes as independent miners and farmers were resented. As the economy soured, organized labor, newspapers, and politicians were quick to raise an outcry against a highly visible minority. Anti-Chinese legislation was rapidly passed at the local and state levels, and then throughout the West. By the mid-1870s, legislators in Washington formed a committee to look into prohibiting Chinese laborers from entering the country.

The era's virulent racism provided a ready rationale. As Caleb Cushing, a U.S. commissioner to China in the 1840s stated, "[We belong] to the excellent white race—whose power and privilege it is to Christianize and civilize, to command and to be obeyed, to conquer and to reign. I admit to an equality with me the white man - my blood and race, whether he be a Saxon of England or

the Celtic of Ireland. But I do not admit as my equals either the red man of America, the yellow man of Asia or the black man of Africa."

In 1877, Indiana Senator Oliver P. Morton wrote, "if the Chinese in California were white people I do not believe that the complaints and warfare made against them would have existed."

Asian immigrants were easy targets. It was the age of the melting pot, which placed intense pressure on European immigrants to abandon the language, dress, customs, even the names from their homeland and to blend seamlessly into their adopted country. Since Asians could not shed their yellow skin, they were deemed forever "unassimilable."

Both the Democratic and Republican parties supported the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which limited immigration on the basis of nationality or race for the first time. The law also spelled out what the Immigration Act of 1870 had already implied, and specifically denied Chinese immigrants the right to become naturalized U.S. citizens.

The Chinese formed the first significant influx of immigrants from Asia. The pattern established by their treatment set the tone for successive waves of newcomers from Japan, the Punjab, Korea, and the Philippines.

### **A Brief History of Legislation Affecting Asian Immigration**

After the United States excluded Chinese labor, the Japanese quickly filled the void. Between 1885 and 1924, 180,000 Japanese arrived on the U.S. mainland. Punjabis, Koreans and Filipinos also came, but in much smaller numbers. As the Japanese in turn began to succeed in agriculture and to ask for fair wages and working conditions, a series of laws and agreements were enacted to restrict and exclude them, beginning with the Gentleman's Agreement of 1908.

Since Japan's government at the time had more diplomatic muscle than China's, it was able to negotiate significant loopholes for relatives of Japanese laborers who already lived in the U.S. Many Japanese immigrants arranged to marry women from their homeland by proxy. Thousands of these "picture brides" met their husbands for the first time when they arrived in the U.S. By 1920, the number of Japanese living in the mainland U.S. had mushroomed to 140,000, while the Chinese population had shrunk to just over 60,000.

In 1921, Japan conceded to the "Ladies Agreement," which barred picture brides from immigrating. A few years later, the final blow was struck. The Immigration Act of 1924 instituted a quota system based on national origins. It heavily favored Northern European immigrants. It also specifically, slammed the door on "aliens ineligible for citizenship." This provision was clearly aimed at the Japanese, since the Chinese and South Asians had already been barred. In 1934 the United States passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, beginning a process which granted the Philippine independence in 1944. The Act changed the status of Filipinos from "nationals" to "aliens" and subjected them to the same immigration restrictions as other Asians. Asian immigration was effectively choked off.

In consideration of China's role as an ally the Pacific War, Congress finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. For the first time, foreign-born Chinese were permitted to become naturalized citizens. After 61 years of exclusion, the doors open to new immigrants from China. Lifting the exclusion was profoundly symbolic, but in practice, little changed. China's immigration quota was a mere 105 people a year. In 1950, the Refugee Relief Act allowed a few Chinese fleeing Communist China to enter on a non-quota basis.

For the next decade-and-a-half, Asian immigration remained at a trickle. Not until the Immigration Act of 1965 did the numbers increase significantly. The new law abolished the quota system which had effectively barred immigration from non-European countries for forty years. The Chinese American population nearly doubled between 1960 and 1970. By the late 1990s, Asians comprised more than half the total numbers of U.S. immigrants.

### **Early Enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act**

The 1882 Exclusion Act prohibited entry to Chinese laborers, but certain categories were "exempt": teachers, students, merchants, "travelers for pleasure," and the children of American-born Chinese. Initially, U.S. Customs officers interpreted and implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act on an individual and arbitrary basis. Over the next thirty years, procedures were standardized, and the burden of enforcement fell to the Bureau of Immigration, the forerunner of today's Bureau of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). By the first decade of the 20th century, a national system was formed specifically to regulate Asian immigration. It was a system which invoked fear and loathing within the Chinese immigrant community. For some families, efforts to gain entry into the U.S. remained a painful memory for generations.

As part of the new system, Immigration officials planned a new facility in San Francisco Bay. Previously, incoming and outgoing migrants from Asia were processed in a two-story wooden shed at the Pacific Mail Steamship Company dock in San Francisco, near what is now Pier 40. Conditions were abysmal, with up to 500 Chinese immigrants detained for long periods in cramped quarters.

After repeated complaints by Chinese community leaders, the Bureau of Immigration decided to build a new, larger immigration facility. They selected a site on the northeastern edge of Angel Island, the largest island in the San Francisco Bay. Its distance from the mainland made it almost escape-proof. It was ideal for quarantining immigrants with communicable diseases, and for preventing newcomers from communicating with family and friends already in San Francisco.

When they learned of the plans, the Chinese community protested that the site was isolated and inconvenient. Over their objections, the Angel Island Immigration Station opened its doors to its first "guests" in January 1910.

Between 1910 and 1940 it is estimated that 175,000 Chinese and 60,000 Japanese immigrants were processed through the Angel Island Immigration Station.

### **The Journey Across the Pacific**

At the time, the average Pacific journey took three weeks. The trip was a cramped, below-decks experience for the majority of the passengers, who traveled in steerage class. Indeed, many had to borrow money to purchase the cheapest passage, money they hoped to repay quickly once they found work in the United States.

When a ship from Asia arrived in San Francisco Bay, Immigration officers boarded it immediately, and separated the passengers by nationality and class. Europeans and travelers holding first- or second-class tickets had their papers processed aboard ship and were quickly allowed to disembark. Steerage passengers, especially those from Asia, Russia, Mexico and other less-desirable locations, as well as those who needed to be quarantined for health reasons, were ferried to Angel Island, where some were subjected to torturous and protracted processing. Some would be detained for weeks, months or years. Others would be deported without being allowed to set foot on the U.S. mainland.

### **At the Immigration Station 1910-1940**

The Angel Island Immigration Station, which operated between 1910 and 1940, was sited on the far side of a remote, often fog-bound island in the middle of the bay. After landing at the pier, would-be immigrants were herded into the wooden Administration Building. Men were separated from women and children, then lined up for medical examinations. It was a humiliating experience for Asians, who were not accustomed to disrobing before strangers or being probed and measured by unfamiliar metal instruments.

“When we first came, we went to the administration building for the physical examination. The doctor told us to take off everything. Really though, it was humiliating. The Chinese never expose themselves like that. They checked you and checked you. We never got used to that kind of thing-and in front of whites.”

-Mr. Lee, age 20 in 1930

All newcomers were tested for disease. If an infection was found, the patient could be hospitalized at his own expense or deported. One survey of medical records of Japanese passing through Angel Island revealed that many were summarily deported for minor and easily treatable ailments like diarrhea, hookworm, or trachoma, an eye disease.

### **The Japanese and Angel Island**

"The Japanese detention quarters were next to ours—they all brought along their baggage and families. They did not need to have hearings and were free to go ashore within 24 hours. That could be because the diplomacy of a strong nation forced the lenient implementation of immigration laws." - Mr. Ma, in 1922

Mr. Ma's observation was accurate. Japan had gained diplomatic power and respect after military victories against China and Russia. Moreover, the Japanese government had proved ready to co-operate with U.S. efforts to limit the entry of Japanese laborers to the U.S. In exchange, most Japanese entrants were processed through Angel Island relatively quickly.

From 1891 to 1900, 27,440 Japanese, mostly laborers, entered the U.S. mainland. Anti-Japanese agitation on the West Coast prompted the Japanese government to stop issuing passports to laborers wishing to emigrate to the U.S. or Canada. Nevertheless, between 1901 to 1907, almost 38,000 Japanese managed to enter the country as students, businessmen, returning laborers, or relatives of U.S. residents. An equal number arrived via Hawaii. This practice was halted by the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, in which Japan agreed to restrict emigration still further. Japanese laborers still leave and re-enter the country, however, and they could bring over their wives, parents and children. They could even send for "picture brides."

The picture bride system was a variation on the traditional Japanese marriage, in which a go-between arranged a suitable match between a bride and groom who did not know each other. When the would-be groom was already in the U.S., photographs were exchanged. To seal the marriage, the bride's name was entered into the groom's family registry in Japan.

Many an enterprising bachelor worked for years, if not decades, in the U.S. to accumulate the nest egg he needed to send for a bride and start a family. At least 20,000 picture brides passed through Angel Island before Japan agreed to bar the practice in the Ladies Agreement of 1921. To Asian immigrants, marriage meant far more than companionship. American-born children provided access to land ownership and other rights that were denied to the immigrant parents.

### **"Paper Sons"**

At Angel Island, Chinese immigrants were measured by a stricter standard than others. After passing medical exams, they faced an additional hurdle: a grueling interrogation by a Board of Special Inquiry. Chinese non-citizen laborers residing on the U.S. were not permitted to bring over their wives, parents and children as the Japanese were. Only American-born Chinese were allowed to send for their children.

Keenly feeling the injustice of discriminatory legislation, many Chinese attempted to circumvent the immigration law by falsely claiming that their parent was or an American citizen. The trade in false documents escalated after San Francisco's Great Earthquake and Fire destroyed the city's municipal records in 1906. Chinese residents made claims which could not be disproven that the disaster had destroyed evidence that they had been born in the U.S. Some of these claims were legitimate, but a thriving trade soon sprang up to bring over cousins or other kinsfolk as "paper sons" and "paper daughters." Sometimes the only "relationship" involved the exchange of cash. American citizens could bring over any children they sired on subsequent trips to China. In effect, some Chinese attempted to circumvent a racist and unjust Exclusion Act by selling immigration "slots" to would-be entrants who were not really their children.

Immigration inspectors developed grueling interrogations to detect paper sons. Over the course of hours or even days, they would be quizzed in detail on their family history, their homes and their villages. Meanwhile, the sponsoring relative would be asked the same questions.

Presumably, only genuine families would be able to supply matching answers to questions like these:

- What is your living room floor made of?
- Where is the rice bin kept?
- Where is your village's temple?
- How many houses are in your village lane?
- What are the names of the neighbors who live in your village lane and what are their occupations?
- What direction does your house in China face?
- How many windows does your house in China have?

As resourceful as the examiners were, the applicants and their relatives were often more so. Both "paper" and legitimate fathers sent letters or "coaching books" to China filled with details which the prospective immigrant spent months committing to memory. Ironically, since many Chinese living in America had not seen their home villages for years, it was easy for a legitimate relationship to trip up over a question like, "What type of bedding did your father sleep in?"

Any discrepancies prolonged the questioning or threw the entire case into doubt, putting the applicant and his family at risk of deportation. The applicant had the right to appeal, however and only 2% of those who appealed their cases were actually deported. Nevertheless, some were incarcerated at Angel Island for as long as two years while their appeals dragged on.

Happily, most applicants were able to pass the interrogation, and 90% of incoming Chinese landed successfully. The average stay at the immigration station was two weeks. Nevertheless, the anxieties of the ordeal were seared in the memory, and the details of the interrogation had to be remembered for life. Not only were Chinese residents at risk of immigration raids and random identity card checks, when they were interrogated every time they tried to re-enter the U.S. after a trip to China.

"I was interrogated for three days. The questions they asked me were baffling, after a day or two of questioning, it was not surprising that people would give a wrong answer here and there. I made the big mistake of saying I was married. At that time, if someone coming as a merchant's son was married in China, he could not enter. My wife and I were separated for 17 years. She came as a G.I. Wife only after I served during World War II."

-Mr. Tong, age 20 in 1932

"We found the examination to be unreasonable and to answer the questions correctly was an impossibility. And seeing that the applicants have to prove their own case - their own evidence if taken literally and compared with the witnesses, would be sufficient to exclude every man, woman and child from landing."

- Joint Report of Merchant's Exchange and Committee on Foreign Affairs of the S.F. Chamber of Commerce, July 26, 1910

### **Unfit for Habitation?**

At first glance, visitors saw a tranquil hillside setting, palm trees, and neatly painted structures which included an administration building, a barracks, a hospital, utility structures and a pier. A closer look revealed locked gates, a guard tower, and fences topped by barbed wire enclosing the station's perimeter.

By 1911, when the Immigration Station had been open for less than a year, local Chinese leaders were demanding that living conditions be investigated. At any one time, the barracks held 250 to 350 people, segregated by nationality and gender, and often packed into rooms crammed with wire bunks stacked three high.

The inmates were not allowed outdoors except for short exercise periods in small, fenced-in yards.

“I had nothing to do there. During the day, we stared at the scenery beyond the barbed wire - the sea and the sky and clouds that were separated from us. Besides listening to the birds outside the fence, we could listen to records and talk to the old-timers in the barracks. Some, due to faulty responses during the interrogation and lengthy appeal procedures, had been there for years.”

- Mr. Lowe, Age 16 in 1939

Food became a constant source of complaint. A Mrs. Jew reported, "Everything was thrown into a big bowl that resembled a washtub. They just steamed the food 'til it was like a soupy stew. After looking at it, you'd lose your appetite. There was cabbage, stewed vegetables bits of stewed meat of low quality." Chinese inmates rioted in 1919 to protest the food, and Chinese cooks were hired. Nevertheless, conditions remained grim. Some demanded to be returned to China on the next boat, and rumors of suicide abounded.

A succession of public health officials found inadequate sanitation and fireproofing, and poor conditions in the dormitories and the hospital. There was insufficient water on the island; a supply had to be barged in. By 1922, both the Assistant Secretary of Labor and the Commissioner General of the Immigration Department had declared the facility filthy and unfit for human habitation, a firetrap that was too expensive to operate. Nevertheless, the facility continued to operate for almost twenty more years.

Station personnel included immigration inspectors, interpreters, administrative and medical personnel, maintenance men and kitchen workers. Although some staff quarters existed, most workers commuted daily to the island on the government ferry.

Christian missionaries were the only people allowed to visit the detainees. Fondly remembered for her kindness was Deaconess Katherine Maurer of the Methodist Episcopal Church; she taught English and American customs to the women and children, and often wrote letters on behalf of the detainees. Clergy and volunteers from several Chinatown missions and from the Chinatown YMCA also visited the detainees regularly.

In 1924, some of the inmates who had been there for months formed the Angel Island Liberty Association to negotiate with the authorities for better conditions for themselves and other detainees. They also welcomed new arrivals, and provided recreational activities for their fellow detainees. Covertly, they were a conduit between the detainees and the outside world, passing on messages and coaching notes smuggled in by Chinese kitchen workers.

### Poetry

There are tens of thousands of poems  
 composed on these walls.  
 They are all cries of complaint and sadness.  
 The day I am rid of this prison and attain success,  
 I must remember that this chapter once existed.  
 In my daily needs, I must be frugal.  
 Needless extravagance leads youth to ruin.  
 All my compatriots should please be mindful.  
 Once you have some real gains, return home early.

-By one from Xiangshan, Poem 31 from *Island*, p. 66.

The most visible and enduring testament of the Angel Island experience are the poems, some written with pencil or brush, others carved using a classical Chinese technique, deep into the wooden walls of the barracks. Long dismissed as mere graffiti, these poems are a vital historic record of the aspirations of the immigrants, and of their anger and sadness at the injustice of their initial reception in America.





(English Translation of the carved poem)

Detained in this wooden house for several tens of days,  
It is all because of the Mexican exclusion law which implicates me.  
It's a pity heroes have no way of exercising their prowess.  
I can only await the word so that I can snap Zu's whip.

From now on, I am departing far from this building  
All of my fellow villagers are rejoicing with me.  
Don't say that everything within is Western styled.  
Even if it is built of jade, it has turned into a cage.

-- Poem 69 from *Island*, p. 134.

The young children do not yet know worry.  
Arriving at the Golden Mountain,  
they were imprisoned in the wooden building.  
Not understanding the sad and miserable situation before their eyes,  
They must play all day like calves.

-- Poem 56 from *Island*, p. 106.

### **The Closing of the Immigration Station**

In the end, community and public concerns regarding the safety of the Immigration Station proved true when the Administration Building burned to the ground on August 12, 1940. The 223 detainees were relocated to a facility in San Francisco in early 1941.

During World War II, the Immigration Station's detention barracks were used by the Army as a World War II prisoner-of-war processing center for German and Japanese soldiers and returning nationals. After the war, the island was turned over to the State of California. The island's abandoned buildings quietly deteriorated. In 1963, Angel Island was established as a state park and the California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) assumed stewardship of the immigration site.

### **Long-Term Effects on the Chinese American Community**

The exclusion laws and the racism which gave birth to them had a profound and far-reaching effect on the Chinese American community in the United States. In 1884, a California court interpreted the 1882 Exclusion Act to mean that Chinese immigrants could not send for their wives. As a result, families were separated for years, or even decades. Children grew up without their fathers, and in the rural villages of China and the early Chinatowns of America, countless wives and husbands were sentenced to lonely and separate lives. This enforced separation stunted the normal development of both family life and community organizations.

During the McCarthy era of the 1950s, Chinese Americans attracted the suspicions of the federal government because China had become a Communist state in 1949. Paper sons in particular were targeted for investigation and deportation. In 1959, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) created the Chinese Confession Program, which offered legalized status in exchange for

confession of illegal entry into the country. The program resulted in 8,000 confessions, and these numbers were cited by the INS as a reason to bar future immigration.

Many in the Chinese community remained fearful of deportation all their lives. Immigrant families rarely talked about Angel Island or the use of false identities, leaving sons and daughters to wonder about their parents' experiences. Journalist William Wong writes:

“So I can only imagine their thoughts when faced with a grand inquisitor asking petty questions about neighbors in China. I can only imagine their feelings of fear and humiliation, the way they felt less than equal, less than worthy of being members of American society.”

### **Contemporary Immigration Issues**

Today, immigration is not based on discriminatory quotas. Immigrants are divided into three entry categories. Preference is given to:

- Family members
- Professionals and skilled and unskilled workers having needed skills
- Special immigrants: religious and medical personnel and refugees, or those seeking asylum from persecution or oppression in their own country.

After the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, state and federal officials applied new immigration measures out of concern for national security. These measures impacted the civil liberties of immigrants. As the authorities traced thousands of leads and sought to prevent a follow-up attack, thousands of immigrants, legal and illegal, were detained without charges or access to legal counsel, often for long periods of time and under harsh or abusive conditions. A number have been deported, although none have been charged as terrorists. Deeply concerned that the civil rights of certain immigrant groups have been violated in the effort to combat terrorism, civil rights groups are working to pressure the Justice Department to change its procedures. Just as some media statements made in the immediate wake of September 11, awoke uncomfortable memories of Pearl Harbor for Japanese Americans, targeted detentions aimed at Arab and Muslim Americans have been disturbingly reminiscent of the unequal treatment of Asian Americans in the past. In such a climate, the lessons of the Angel Island Immigration Station remain more relevant than ever.

### **Immigration Station Rediscovery and Preservation Efforts**

Once the Immigration Station closed, the bitter experiences there were rarely if ever mentioned to succeeding generations. In time, Angel Island began to recede into memory like fog in the bay. Then, in 1970, shortly before the barracks were scheduled to be demolished, California State Park Ranger Alexander Weiss rediscovered the poetry on the walls of the abandoned barracks. Understanding that he had unearthed something significant, Weiss contacted San Francisco State College Professor George Araki and photographer Mak Takahashi. Together they photographed the walls of the barracks. Sparked by the discovery, Bay Area Asian Americans, spearheaded by Paul Chow, formed the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee (AIISHAC). The organization advocated for preserving the station and interpreting its history. In July 1976, AIISHAC's hard work came to fruition when the state

legislature appropriated \$250,000 to restore and preserve the barracks as a state monument. In 1983, the barracks were opened to the public. To continue its work, members of AIISHAC created the nonprofit Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF).

Today, AIISF partners with California State Parks and the National Park Service to continue preservation efforts and to educate the public on Angel Island's crucial role in Pacific Rim immigration.

In 1997, the National Park Service declared Angel Island Immigration Station a National Historic Landmark. In 1999, Save America's Treasures, a project of the National Trust and the White House Millennium Council, adopted Angel Island Immigration Station as one of its Official Projects, providing \$500,000 for the preservation of the precious Chinese poems on the barracks' walls. In March 2000, California voters passed a state bond measure that set aside \$15 million specifically for restoration of the Angel Island Immigration Station. In June 2003, staff and volunteers from the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation and California State Parks, along with design professionals, completed a master plan for the restoration of the Station. Phase One is currently underway and by 2005, the restoration of the Detention Barracks and the interpretation of the Administration Building footprint is scheduled to be completed.

The Angel Island Immigration Station continues to be a part of America's story. By keeping its history to alive, the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation hopes to make its lessons an integral part of our national dialogue about the complex intersection of race, immigration and our American identity.

## **Topics for Discussion and Additional Research**

### **Community Participation**

The immigration station still benefits from the efforts of volunteers in the community. Have students think about: What have they or their friends or family members have done to help other people in their community? Actions from people like themselves can make a difference. What are some issues in their community that they can work on?

### **Contemporary Immigration**

What are some of today's immigrants' experiences like? Look though resources such as newspapers, magazines, and websites to find information about the issues and difficulties that today's immigrants face. How do government policies today affect those who are immigrating and living in the United States? What are the some of the issues regarding immigration today, i.e. national security, granting asylum for political refugees, workers for industry, etc.? Have students do some research on current government immigration policies. How have they affected people in their community?