

# Teaching about Angel Island through Historical Empathy and Poetry

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When immigration is taught in schools, students usually learn about Ellis Island and Europeans arriving in the Northeast. Less often do they learn about immigrants from other continents, so, when I was asked by the local school district to develop a series of lessons for the first through fifth grades that would be used during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, I decided to teach students about Angel Island.

The lesson described here was taught in a combined (grade three and four) classroom and focused on the movement of Asians—the Chinese in particular—to America via the immigration station at Angel Island. A previous lesson introduced students to the diversity of Asian and Pacific Island nations and cultures; later lessons were about Asian immigrants’ past, and their recent contributions to farming and food industries in the United States.

## The Ellis Island of the West?

Because Ellis Island is perhaps the most famous emblem of American immigration in the early 20th century, Angel Island is frequently referred to as “the Ellis Island of the West.” However, Angel Island had several characteristics that were distinctly different from Ellis Island.<sup>1</sup> Ellis Island mostly processed European immigrants; one of the immigration station’s goals was to begin the process of turning these immigrants into naturalized Americans. Angel Island was designed in 1907 to enact newly established immigration inspection procedures resulting from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Angel Island was a primary entryway for Chinese and other Asian immigrants, but it also received up to a third of new arrivals from Europe and Latin America from its opening in 1910 until a fire

resulted in its 1940 closing.

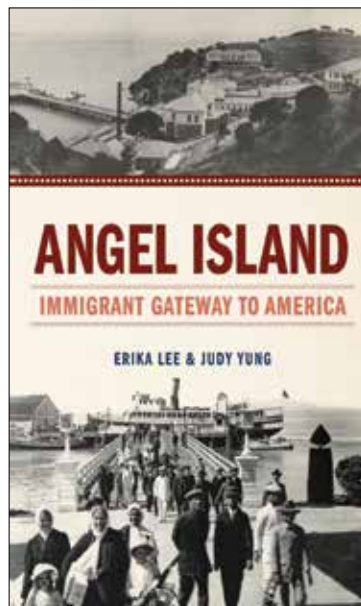
At Ellis Island, the majority of European immigrants underwent a “six-second physical” while fully clothed, but Asian immigrants at Angel Island were subjected to invasive and sometimes humiliating group examinations. Chinese immigrant Jann Mon Fong recounted, “The physicians had us stripped to the skin and exposed to the chilly sea breeze for several hours before he routinely tapped our chest and spine and ordered us to jump up and down like monkeys.”<sup>2</sup>

European immigrants were typically processed through Ellis Island in a matter of hours or, at most, a few days. At Angel Island, 70 percent of alien arrivals were detained; Chinese immigrants in particular were placed in racially segregated detention for days, weeks, and, for some, upwards of a year. Quock Shee, a Chinese woman who immigrated to America to join her merchant husband, had the longest known detention

at Angel Island of nearly 600 nights.<sup>3</sup> Race was the determining factor in how immigrants were treated on Angel Island, but preferential treatment was also given to those in higher economic standing, traveling in first-class cabins. These significant contrasts between Angel and Ellis Island reflect the differences in attitude toward various groups of immigrants.

## Early Chinese Immigration

The mid-19th century witnessed large-scale American recruitment of Chinese laborers for industrial development of the West. Chinese immigration to America began during the California Gold Rush (1848–1858). Young men from the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province were recruited to work as miners and railroad and farm laborers. Between 1850



## An Integrated Social Studies and Language Arts Lesson

and 1880, the Chinese population in the United States increased fifteen fold from 7,520 to 105,465; in 1870, the Chinese composed 8.6 percent of California's total population and a quarter of the state's wage-earning force.<sup>4</sup>

But when the gold ran out and the economy faltered, Chinese immigrants headed to cities like San Francisco and worked for wages lower than their White counterparts, sometimes serving as scabs during labor strikes. They became the targets of racist stereotypes, discriminatory laws and taxes, and racial violence. Viewed as an moral and racial threat and unable to assimilate, Chinese workers became known as the “yellow peril,” and anti-Chinese sentiment spread across the country, culminating in America's first federal regulation of immigration via the Page Law in 1875.<sup>5</sup> The Page Law classified any individual coming to America from Asia as a forced laborer, “undesirable,” and also applied to Asian prostitutes and convicts. The Chinese Exclusion Act followed in 1882, barring all Chinese laborers from entering the U.S. for ten years and prohibiting all Chinese immigrants (including those already in America) from naturalization. Only Chinese students, teachers, diplomats, merchants, and travelers were permitted to immigrate to the United States. The act was renewed two more times before becoming permanent in 1904.

### Strategies to Get In

As a result of stricter governmental enforcement of exclusion laws, many Chinese sought alternative paths to immigration. The most common migration strategy was to falsely claim membership in one of the classes exempt from exclusion. Another strategy for children was to falsely claim parentage from someone of a class that was allowed to immigrate; these children were known as “paper sons” because, on paper, they claimed to be the offspring of exempt-class Chinese. However, when the Angel Island immigration station opened in 1910, officials were already well aware of these methods to evade exclusion laws and subjected Chinese family members to long, detailed interrogations. In one extreme case, an applicant was asked nearly 900 questions.

From 1910 to 1940, over 178,000 Chinese men and women were admitted as new immigrants, returning residents, and U.S. citizens. The majority came through San Francisco and Angel Island, approximately 100,000 of whom were detained—the highest rates compared to other immigrant groups. Comprising 70 percent of Angel Island's detainee population, Chinese immigrants were subjected to longer examinations, interrogations, and detentions than other groups. These stricter enforcement measures reflected the continued discrimination against Chinese immigrants and the progressive expanse of exclusion over time. Despite the tremendous contributions of Chinese laborers to the development of the American West, the Chinese Exclusion Act remained in place for 60 years. Its Congressional repeal in 1943 occurred in the midst of World War II as a way to keep the wavering National Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek in the war against Japan.

The lesson began with a comparison between Ellis and Angel Islands using video and primary sources.<sup>6</sup> After reading some of the poetry written by detainees at Angel Island, students composed their own poems from the perspective of an Angel Island detainee. Students were offered opportunities to reflect on the media presented throughout the lesson and were prompted to use historical thinking with the primary sources.

### Comparing Ellis Island and Angel Island

I began with the question, “Have you ever heard of Ellis Island?” Although the students in the third/fourth grade multi-age classroom had not yet had a full year of American history, several were able to share a fact or two. To provide all students with some basic knowledge, we watched the three-minute documentary *Deconstructing History: Ellis Island* produced by the History Channel,<sup>7</sup> and discussed what students saw and what surprised them. The video included facts about the construction and purpose of Ellis Island, the path that immigrants followed during processing, and many historical images. Most students were awestruck by the size of the facility and the number of people who walked through its halls.

Next, we talked about Angel Island. I provided students with a few basic facts: why it was built, the time period during which it operated, and the diversity of immigrants who arrived from over 80 different countries—mostly from China. Then, we examined three photographs revealing different groups of immigrants through their arrival at Angel Island. The photos showed immigrants leaving a ship as they enter Angel Island circa 1925,<sup>8</sup> immigrants arriving at the immigration station in 1912,<sup>9</sup> and health inspectors examining detainees at the immigration station circa 1917.<sup>10</sup>

Professor Sam Wineburg argues that history has the potential to humanize us in ways that few other areas of the curriculum can. He defines historical thinking as the “ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to traverse the rugged terrain that lies between the poles of familiarity and distance from the past.”<sup>11</sup> Using components of historical thinking, such as significance and agency, students described what they saw and compared the images to what they had learned in the Ellis Island video.

Another element of historical thinking is empathy, the ability to see and understand the world from a perspective that is not our own. However, meaningful historical empathy must be based on historical evidence.<sup>12</sup> Students engaged in historical empathy by imagining what the pictured groups of immigrants might be thinking and feeling in the context of the historical period. I asked students to compare the image of the health inspection to their own experiences visiting the doctor, which led several children to discuss inspectors' possible reasons for having people undress as a group (maybe for efficiency and speed), and also to ask about issues of privacy and comfort in a foreign land (What do I hope to experience when I set foot in a different country?).



Daniel Quan, Official Exhibit Designer, stands before a wall carved with Chinese poems, a restoration of one of the Angel Island immigrant quarters.

Inset: Certificates of identity issued to people who came through the island.

These images are from the virtual tour video provided by the Angel Island Immigration Foundation ([www.aiisf.org](http://www.aiisf.org))

### Primary Documents: Poetry from the Island of Tears

After students analyzed the four historical photos, I showed them an eight-minute video tour produced by the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation.<sup>13</sup> The video covered similar topics to those in the video about Ellis Island, but it also revealed details about detainee life and the poetry carved into the walls by Chinese detainees. As prolonged detentions were a major feature of the Angel Island immigration experience, this video allowed students to delve further into the perspectives of people from the past from a variety of national origins. They saw a map, detailing various routes to Angel Island from Asia, Australia, and South America; the separate Asian and European dining rooms; and collections of luggage, representing detainees from China and Africa.

The video showed a historical recreation of dormitory bunks, stacked three high and with little space between them, and it simulated the cacophony of ever-present noise and multitude of languages in the barracks. I asked students how they would feel in such a situation, and they echoed the sentiments of sadness, loneliness, and frustration that were part of detainees' experience. "I wouldn't be able to sleep!" Zachary protested. Julissa and Jason exclaimed, "I would run away!" Students marveled at the difficulty of being apart from your family for an unknown amount of time and not having modern-day conveniences to communicate with them.

The video featured the poetry carvings found in the walls of the dormitories and bathrooms. The immigration station's exhibit designer recounted the discovery and preservation processes undertaken with the carvings and offered several examples.<sup>14</sup>

After discussing the video, we read aloud in translation two poems,<sup>15</sup> from Angel Island. I asked students to interpret parts of these poems, and several pointed out words relating to emotions: anxious, depressed, loneliness, sorrow. "They're not being allowed to live a normal life," Monica reflected. "I would want my friends to be there so I would have someone to talk to and share my feelings with."

### Historical Empathy through Creating Poetry

At this point, I prompted students to take the perspective of an immigrant like the ones described in the video. I asked them to choose a nationality represented in the Angel Island video and to imagine themselves as that character detained at Angel Island. Considering our discussions, what experiences might they have? To envision the emotions their character might be feeling, I asked them to compose a brief poem in any format they desired, using the two poems that we had discussed as models.

Students were able to compose drafts that demonstrated an understanding of the complexity of detainee experiences at Angel Island. Some examples of student poems (spelling and grammar corrected) follow:

The concrete walls holding me in like the bars on a prison cell, separated from my family, is this help or torture, crying until my tears won't come, crying screaming and praying have become familiar sounds. There is only darkness and no light.

I've come from Russia to get away from the war. I had to leave my family behind, I heard America was a great place, but it feels like a prison, I expected more. The way I feel is like I have to stay on a boat with nothing. I wish I could leave this prison.

When I peer out the window I only see darkness and sadness. I don't know when I will leave but I am forced to stay here for 3 years. I am very sad I just feel angry. I hope just one more second but that won't be true.

Students' work reflected historical empathy that went beyond simply trying to imagine themselves in a certain location. By examining events through historical evidence, including pictures, poems, and the combination of primary sources presented in the Angel Island video, students were able to consider the desolation and frustration of detention and how it clashed with the hopes and dreams of many Chinese and other immigrants in the early twentieth century.

### Modifications for Other Grades

This lesson was taught to a third/fourth grade class, but could be modified for younger or older students as part of a broader social studies unit on immigration in alignment with Dimension 2, "Perspectives and Historical Sources and Evidence," of the College, Career, and Civil Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.<sup>16</sup> The experiences of Chinese and other Asian immigrants at Angel Island easily lend themselves to a comparison with contemporary issues of undocumented immigration and what it means to be an American now.

For younger students, picture books like Milly Lee's *Landed* and Helen Foster James and Virginia Shin-Mui Loh's *Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America* provide greater context for youth immigration experiences after the Chinese Exclusion Act. Older students could use this lesson alongside Russell Freedman's nonfiction book *Angel Island: Gateway to Gold Mountain* to better understand the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act and to examine how class greatly affected immigration opportunities for many groups.

For teachers able to integrate language arts and social studies, this lesson could be part of a larger poetry unit using the book *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*.<sup>17</sup> Most of the Angel Island poems were written in the classical style of Chinese poetry, most with four or eight lines per poem, and five or seven characters per line.

### Beyond Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month

The story of Angel Island is part of the story of America. Lessons like this offer a more complete version of our country's rich and complicated past while allowing educators to give increasingly diverse groups of students a better understanding of how people from a variety of nationalities have contributed to our present. By integrating historical content and primary sources

with language arts components, teachers can support student learning in multiple ways while making a greater impact on their knowledge of America and the world. 🌐

### Notes

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12. Peter Seixas and Carla Peck, "Teaching Historical Thinking," *Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies*, Alan Sears and Ian Wright, eds. (Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 2004), pp. 109-117.
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