

Fifth Grade Lesson on Turn of Century Immigration by Sohyun An

GA Social Studies Standards

SS5H1 Describe how life changed in America at the turn of the century.

d. Describe the reasons people immigrated to the United States, from where they emigrated, and where they settled.

Background Information

When people hear the word “turn of century immigration,” they might think about Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty, European immigrants, but not often Angel Island or Asian immigrants who came through Angel Island Immigration Station.

When teaching about immigration only focuses on Ellis Island and its mostly European immigrants, students don’t get the opportunity to learn about immigration to the United States from other continents. Teaching about the Angel Island Immigration Station, located on the West Coast in the San Francisco Bay, will allow students to better understand our nation’s rich diversity *and* its complicated past related to Asian immigrants.

San Francisco was the largest point of entry for Asian immigrants in the United States, processing one million people on their way into or out of the country between 1910 and 1940. Half of these immigrants went through the Angel Island Immigration Station, which opened on January 21, 1910.

The history of Angel Island is directly related to anti-Chinese and anti-Asian immigration laws. When the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, immigration officials were required to carefully review the documents of all Chinese arrivals. This required passengers to be detained somewhere after disembarking from their ships. Initially, other ships were used; but it soon became clear that a more permanent space was needed. Thus, Angel Island Immigration Station was built.

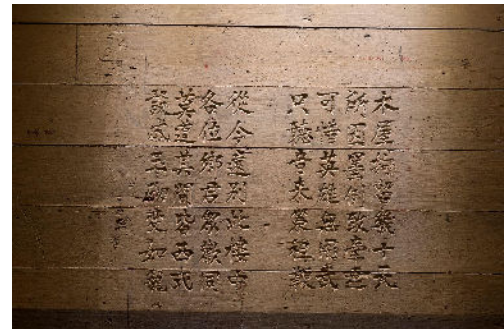
While Ellis Island Immigration Station was processing immigrants mostly from Europe, Angel Island Immigration Station was processing immigrants mostly from Asia as well as Russia, Australia, and Latin America. The greatest distinction between Ellis and Angel Islands is that the former was meant to welcome immigrants to the United States while the latter was designed specifically to exclude them—at least the ones who were Chinese.



For comparison, the Ellis Island detention rates were 10% for legal reasons and 10% for medical reasons whereas 70% of the immigrants who arrived at Angel Island were detained. Of the approximately 300,000 people who were detained between 1910 and 1940, one-third were Chinese. Chinese woman Kong Din Quong had the longest known detention of nearly two years.

Part of the rationale behind these detentions was in response to a system of false immigration claims. In 1906, the San Francisco earthquake destroyed all of the city’s birth records. This created an opportunity for members of the exempt classes of Chinese—who were still allowed to legally immigrate to the U.S.—to claim family members who didn’t exist. Chinese who held fake identification papers were known as “paper sons” or “paper daughters.”

Immigration officials were on the lookout for paper sons and daughters and asked many questions to test if the immigrants had fake documents or not. The lengthy detentions experienced by immigrants resulted in intense feelings of isolation and anger, and some carved poems expressing their feelings into the barrack walls. Over 200 poems have been preserved, mostly in Chinese but also in Russian, English, Japanese, and other languages.



One of the most famous paper sons was artist Tyrus Wong, best known for the illustrative style found throughout the Disney film *Bambi*. A 2015 documentary about Wong, entitled *Tyrus*, includes an interview where he describes the interrogation procedures that he and many others faced at Angel Island.

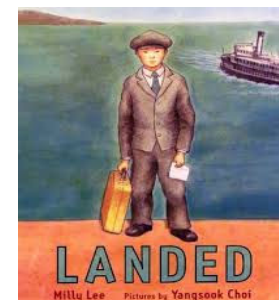
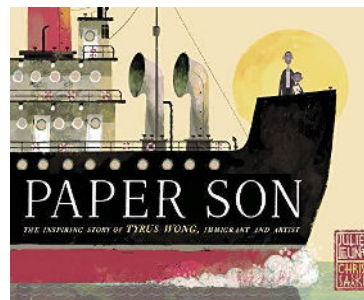


[The Angel Island Immigration Station](#) Foundation’s website includes several virtual galleries, 3D tours of the immigration station, collections of primary sources, and lesson plans. [The Immigrant Voices section](#) of the website allows students to dive deeply into the stories of individuals who immigrated through Angel Island, many of which are written by the immigrants’ descendants or Angel Island researchers. There are also several picturebooks to support the teaching of this often-ignored immigration station.

Instructional Suggestions and Resources

1. Reading and Discussing Children’s Books. Have students read one of two picture books below and share the story to the class. Identify and discuss common and different details in the stories.

- [Paper Son: The Inspiring Journey of Tyrus Wong, Immigrant and Artist](#)
- [Landed](#)



2. Virtual Tour of Angel Island. Have students watch a short video clip on Angel Island Immigration Station and conduct a virtual tour as a class. [Click here](#)

3. Primary & Secondary Source Analysis. As a class, watch oral interviews and analyze photos in the website, [An Immigrant's Journey: Follow in the footsteps of Angel Island immigrants](#) to uncover what it was like to arrive in San Francisco between 1910 and 1940.

4. Class Discussion. After doing one or more activities suggested above, have a class discussion:

- Why do countries have immigration stations? What is their purpose and why might islands be good locations for such places?
- Why do you think some immigrants were willing to break immigration rules by becoming “paper sons” or “paper daughters”?
- Some immigrants were children traveling alone. What do you think that experience would feel like? What are some of the challenges they might have faced?

For more resources

- Dr. Noreen Naseem Rodríguez wrote the article, ["Teaching about Angel Island through Historical Empathy and Poetry"](#) and it was published in Social Studies and the Young Learner in 2015. It is about a lesson on Angel Island she developed for a third/fourth grade class (but also adaptable to other grades).
- KQED’s Discovering Angel Island: The Story Behind the Poems provides engaging lesson plans building on a short video clip
 - [Discovering Angel Island Video](#)
 - [Poems Lesson Plan - Grades 4, 5, 6](#)
 - [Social Studies Lesson Plan - Grades 4, 5, 6](#)

Do you want to include more stories of Asian America into your lessons? Check out this fabulous book, [Teaching Asian America in Elementary Classrooms](#) by Noreen Naseem Rodríguez, Sohyun An, & Ester June Kim.

