

Third Grade Lesson on Angel Island By Noreen Naseem Rodriguez

GA Social Studies Standards:

SS3CG2 Explain the importance of Americans sharing certain central democratic beliefs and principles, both personal and civic.

Background Information:

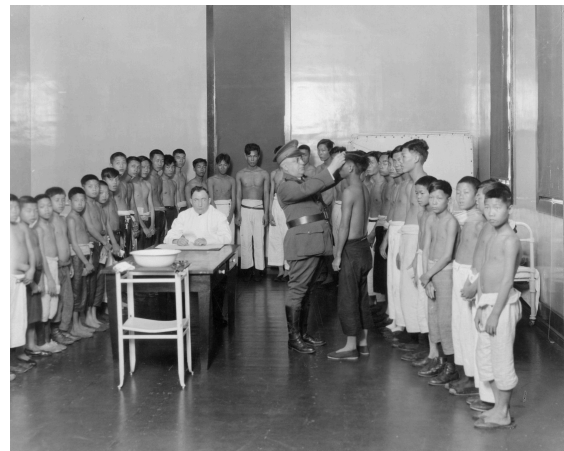


Most lessons on immigration begin and end with Ellis Island, which primarily served as a port of entry for European immigrants from 1892 to 1954. However, on the West Coast, another immigration station opened the gates of the United States to a much broader range of immigrants from Russia, Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and Australia. Angel Island, located in the San Francisco Bay, did not have the same reputation as Ellis Island, nor was there a stunning Statue of Liberty to welcome weary but hopeful travelers. It was more like a detention center, and for many Chinese immigrants, it was the only part of the United States they could reach before they were turned away and deported home.

The Angel Island Immigration Station was built directly in response to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As the first piece of legislation to establish federal control over immigration (as well as the first to legally ban a group from immigrating on the basis of nationality), the Chinese Exclusion Act established new immigration inspection procedures that stipulated that passengers on incoming sea vessels must be inspected and approved before landing in the United States. For almost twenty years, Chinese passengers were moved from one steamship to another as immigration officials reviewed their cases. In 1898, a two-story wooden “detention shed” was built on Pier 40 to house Chinese detainees. The detention shed was horribly overcrowded and unsanitary, leading to enough complaints that Congress appropriated \$250,000 to construct a proper immigration facility similar to Ellis Island. Angel Island was selected and the immigration station was hastily constructed, opening on January 21, 1910. The next day, 101 Chinese detainees and one “gloomy Hindu” were transferred to Angel Island from the detention shed, along with 400 mostly Chinese new passengers from steamships.

A study by Robert Barde suggests that 70% of foreign arrivals, as well as U.S. citizens, were detained at Angel Island, leading scholars Erika Lee and Judy Yung to describe Angel Island as a symbol of exclusion. This exclusion was only applied selectively, however, and overwhelmingly toward Chinese immigrants, who were subjected to invasive group health examinations and grueling interviews with questions like, “How many feet is your house from the one next door?”

The intensive and lengthy interrogations and detentions were developed in response to a system of false immigration claims that began before the Angel Island Immigration Station even opened. The 1906 San



Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed all of the city's birth records. While the Chinese Exclusion Act barred the entry of laborers and denied naturalized citizenship to Chinese already in the U.S., certain groups were exempt and still allowed entry: merchants, teachers, students, diplomats/officials, and tourists. This created an opportunity for members of these exempt classes to profit off Chinese immigrants who belonged to the excluded group. Exempt Chinese would invent names and profiles for nonexistent family members to create false identification papers, which they would then sell to desperate laborers. Those who held fake documents were known as paper sons and daughters.

One of the most famous paper sons was the artist responsible for the lush artistry in the Disney film *Bambi*. Tyrus Wong arrived at the Angel Island Immigration Station as a child. In a 2015 documentary named after him, Wong describes the interrogation he was subjected to. The Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation website (<https://www.aiisf.org/curriculum>) has several lesson plans available for free, including one with sample interrogation questions.

Unlike Ellis Island, where only 10% of immigrants were detained for legal reasons and another 10% were detained for medical treatment, 60% of the immigrants at Angel Island were confined up to 3 days. Ten percent of Angel Island detainees had longer stays, with an average of two weeks. A Chinese man named Kong Din Quong had the longest known detention of 756 days, and was deported after 25 months.



Detainees were held in barracks segregated by race and gender, and some prospective immigrants released their frustrations by carving poetry into the walls. Some of these powerful and painful poems have been preserved and they can also be found in books like *Island* by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung and the film *Carved in Silence*, available from the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. After a fire in 1940, the Angel Island Immigration Station was abandoned, but its history deserves to be taught to paint a fuller image of 20th century immigration to the United States.

Instructional Resources and Suggestions:

1. **Introduction:** Ask students what they know about immigration, using whatever brainstorming or mapping activity they are accustomed to. If they mention Ellis Island, ask students how people immigrated to the U.S. from other continents - it may be useful to pull out a map and ask students what ports might be closer to the continents of Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia.
2. **Instructional Activity:** Based on your instructional focus, this can be a purely social studies focused lesson or it can be integrated with language arts through a more lengthy focus on poetry. Options are included for both, with multiple suggestions for read alouds.

a. Social Studies/Civics

i. Day 1:

Read aloud the book *I Am An American* by Martha Brockenbrough with Grace Lin.

- After the first several pages, ensure that students understand that Chinatowns are ethnic enclaves where Chinese people were able to rent and purchase homes and businesses and that in many places, those were the *only* places where those options were possible because white Americans did not want Chinese living in their neighborhoods and working in their storefronts and restaurants.

- In the scene with the cracked window, let students know that American businessmen actually went to China to recruit Chinese to work on the railroad, so American businesses benefited tremendously from Chinese laborers, particularly because they did not have to pay them as much as they would pay white American workers. But instead of blaming greedy corporations, people who were struggling financially often blamed Chinese workers for their problems.
- After the text describes Wong Kim Ark's parents leaving the United States, mention the Chinese Exclusion Act explicitly. Let students know that it targeted Chinese workers, like railroad laborers and miners. Chinese who own businesses, were teachers or students, who worked in the government, and who were tourists were still allowed into the U.S.
- After finishing the primary text, remind students (by writing on the board and/or repeating aloud) that Wong Kim Ark guaranteed for everyone **birthright citizenship**. Mention that the other type of citizenship is called **naturalization**, which is for people who were not born in a country. Ask students to summarize how Chinese immigrants to the U.S. were treated and why Wong Kim Ark's court case was so important for all people.

b. Social Studies/Civics

- i. **Day 2:** Flip back to the pages that show Wong Kim Ark imprisoned below deck on a ship while awaiting readmission to the U.S. Let students know that after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the U.S. had to come up with a way to check immigrants' paperwork **before** they landed in the U.S. in order to enforce the act. In the years following the act, one solution was to move immigrants from one ship to another while their paperwork was reviewed. Eventually, the government built an immigration station similar to Ellis Island in the San Francisco Bay on Angel Island. Today you will read aloud a story about a boy who will travel through the new immigration station. Begin reading *Paper Son* by Julie Leung.
 - The first illustration shows Tyrus holding his paperwork in his hands - make sure students are aware that these are immigration papers, like those that the Chinese Exclusion Act now required.
 - After the next spread of pages, check to make sure that students understand that Tyrus' papers are fake. Let students know that the San Francisco Fire of 1906 destroyed all the birth certifications in the city, so people who would not have been able to immigrate due to Chinese Exclusion found another way to get into the U.S. These people who purchased fake immigration papers were known as paper sons and daughters, or as the book notes, *zi jai*.
 - After finishing the book, play [this video](#) of Tyrus recalling his immigration journey; his speech may be difficult for some students to understand, but after reading the book and by reading the subtitles, they should be able to comprehend and make connections. Content warning: Tyrus mentions detainees committing suicide; you may want to fast forward through that statement.
- ii. **Assessment:** Ask students to respond aloud or in writing to the following questions:
 1. What did the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 do?
 2. How did the Chinese Exclusion Act change how immigration stations

- had to be run?
3. How did the Chinese Exclusion Act change detention procedures for immigrants arriving in San Francisco? (students should mention ship detention and the creation of the Angel Island Immigration Station)
 4. What was the name for Chinese immigrants who used fake papers with the names of fictional children of U.S. citizens?
 5. How did immigration officials try to prevent paper sons and daughters from entering the U.S.?
- c. **Poetry Extension:** If you'd like to integrate this lesson with language arts, share [this video](#) about the Angel Island Immigration Station with your students. At the end of the video, it will show footage of the poetry carved into the barrack walls. More detail about the poetry inscriptions, including examples, can also be found at <https://www.aiisf.org/poems-and-inscriptions> and <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/angel-island-poetry>. Choose 2-3 poems to read together with students. Discuss the emotions expressed and the kind of language that is used. If needed, brainstorm vocabulary words and adjectives that might be appropriate for a detainee to write. Ask students to consider how 9-year-old Tyrus felt, the only child in the detention barracks and away from his father. From a similar perspective, ask them to compose a short 8-10 line poem about detention. Students can share with partners or with the whole class, as time permits.

Images Used:

1. Women detained at Angel Island. Public domain via National Library of Medicine
2. Original Caption: "Angel Island, Cal. Intensive physical examination of aliens, Immigration Hospital." National Archives, Record Group 90: Records of the Public Health Service Series: Public Health Service Historical Photograph File
3. Dormitory at Angel Island, an island in San Francisco Bay that offers expansive views of the San Francisco skyline, the Marin County Headlands and Mount Tamalpais. The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.