6th Grade Lesson Plan

Geographies of Exclusion:
Transnational Asian Migration through Canada and Latin America
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GA Standards:

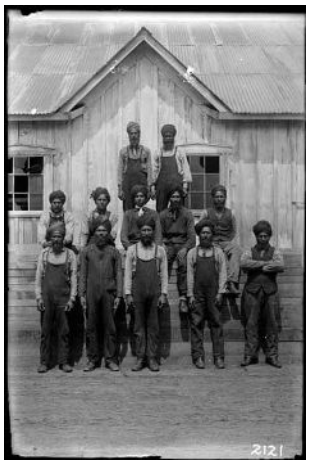
- SS6G3 Explain the impact of location, climate, distribution of natural resources, and population distribution on Latin America.
- SS6G5 Explain the impact of location, climate, distribution of natural resources, and population distribution on Canada.

Background Information

To master 6th-grade geography, students must understand that location, climate, and natural resources do not just dictate where cities are built; they also dictate how global human migration flows operate. At the turn of the century, the geography of Canada and Latin America became deeply intertwined with Asian American history.

When the United States passed anti-Asian immigration laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the ocean ports of the U.S. West Coast like Ellis Island and Angel Island became legally blocked. To bypass these walls, thousands of Asian migrants analyzed the physical and political geography of North and South America, utilizing Canada and Mexico as geographic "backdoors" to enter the United States.

The Canadian Corridor (Focus on SS6G5)



In the early 1900s, the vast majority of Canada's population was concentrated along its southern border due to the harsh, freezing climates further north. The border between western Canada (British Columbia) and the United States (Washington State) was an invisible line slicing through thousands of miles of dense, unpoliced wilderness and mountains.

Because both India and Canada were colonies of the British Empire, Indian migrants, primarily Punjabi Sikh men fleeing British colonial taxation and engineered poverty, realized they could legally enter Canada as British subjects. They arrived at the Pacific port of Vancouver and settled heavily along the coast.

The primary pull factor drawing these South Asian workers to British Columbia was its natural resources: massive coniferous forests. The timber industry required intense, dangerous physical labor to fell trees and process lumber in coastal sawmills.

However, Canada's 1908 Continuous Journey Regulation abruptly stranded Indian laborers by banning any immigrant who did not arrive via a single, non-stop maritime voyage from their home country. Because no direct steamship routes existed between India and Canada, the law

functioned as an unspoken, absolute ban on South Asian immigration. Travelers stopping in Japan or Hawaii were automatically disqualified, preventing families from joining workers already in the country. Blocked by this legislation and shut out of Canadian lumber mills by systemic racism, South Asian workers had to pivot, turning to the region's unique geography to find new opportunities.

Using the cover of the dense Pacific Northwest forest canopy and following transnational river valleys, hundreds of South Asian workers, mostly Sikh men, walked south across the unmonitored land border into the United States to settle in the Pacific Northwest, working on American transcontinental railroads and agricultural farms.

The Latin American and Mexican Transit (Focus on SS6G3)

Following the global abolition of African slavery in nineteenth-century European colonies, plantation and mine owners across Latin America desperately sought a new source of cheap, disposable labor. This gave rise to the indentured labor trade, which brought hundreds of thousands of Chinese and South Asian workers (historically called "coolies") across the oceans.

- Peru: Chinese and Japanese laborers were pulled to Peru's coast to extract guano (highly valuable sea-bird fertilizer used worldwide) and to labor on sugar and cotton plantations. By the early 1900s, this established the largest Japanese population distribution in South America outside of Brazil.
- Mexico: Under President Porfirio Díaz, Mexico sought to rapidly exploit its northern natural resources (copper, silver, and cattle). To do this, Mexico built extensive rail systems stretching from Mexico City up to the U.S. border. Thousands of Chinese laborers migrated to Northern Mexican states like Sonora and Chihuahua to build these railroads and establish thriving merchant communities.

Because the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act made landing at a U.S. seaport impossible, Chinese migrants utilized Mexico's location as a vital stepping stone. They traveled by boat to Mexican ports, boarded the newly constructed Mexican railroads, and rode them straight to the northern border.

The border zone between Northern Mexico and the American Southwest (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona) is dominated by an arid desert climate with extreme heat and punishing terrain. Because this climate made physical patrolling by early U.S. "Chinese Inspectors" (the precursors to the U.S. Border Patrol) incredibly difficult, Chinese migrants organized intricate underground networks. They crossed the desert on foot or hid in cargo train cars moving across the border, establishing the first major undocumented land-border crossing routes into the United States.



Historical and Modern Continuities

Teachers can use these two powerful case studies to demonstrate how geography, borders, and Asian migration loops continued to collide throughout the 20th and 21st centuries:

- WWII Japanese Peruvian Deportation

  During World War II, the United States government used its massive geopolitical influence to alter the population distribution of Latin America. Fearing a "fifth column" of subversives near the Panama Canal, the U.S. government pressured Latin American nations, most notably Peru, to arrest their own legal citizens and residents of Japanese descent. Over 2,200 Japanese Peruvians were rounded up, stripped of their passports, forced onto U.S. military transport ships, and brought thousands of miles north to be incarcerated in camps inside the United States desert interior (such as Crystal City, Texas). The U.S. treated these Peruvian citizens as geographic hostages, trading many of them to Japan in exchange for captured American prisoners of war.

- Tereza Lee and the DREAM Act

  The modern undocumented experience in the United States is deeply multi-ethnic, dictated by global economic geography. Tereza Lee, the world-renowned classical pianist whose life story inspired the drafting of the original DREAM Act of 2001, represents this exact transnational loop. Following the devastation of the Korean War, her parents emigrated from South Korea to Brazil, navigating South America's changing post-war urban economy. Later, her family migrated north from Brazil to Chicago, Illinois, where Tereza grew up undocumented. Her family's journey directly maps how Asian migration frequently weaves through the geography of Latin America before arriving in the United States.

Suggested Teaching Activity

This activity focuses on analyzing how the location, climate, and resources of Canada and Mexico allowed South Asian and East Asian immigrants to bypass U.S. exclusion laws. The goal is for students to apply geographic concepts (location, climate, resources) to explain turn-of-the-century Asian migration through Canada and Latin America.

- First, project a physical map of North and South America. Highlighting the U.S. West Coast ports (San Francisco/Seattle), explain that in 1900, the U.S. government "locked" these ports to Asian immigrants using anti-Asian immigration laws.
- Then, ask students: "Looking at the physical map, if the ocean entry points are blocked, how could a migrant from India or China still find a way into the United States?" Guide students to identify the vast, open land borders shared with Canada and Mexico.
- Have students read one of the following resources.
  - Canada's Continuous Journey Regulation Explanation
  - Between the US and Mexico, a Forgotten 'Desert of the Chinese'
  - The Origins of Border Crossing and Border Policing

- Guide students to share out what they learned from the resources and conclude by emphasizing that human migration is not just about politics; it is also shaped by the physical geography, climate, and resources of our planet.

Images Used:

1. Sikh sawmill workers of the North Pacific Lumber Company at Barnet, photographed by Philip Timms, B.C., Canada, ca.1900's. Via Vancouver Public Library/Public domain https://localhistory.vpl.ca/link/photos6438
2. Frederic Remington's "Chinese immigrant dying of thirst in the Mohave Desert, 1800s." Racist cartoon via https://crossculturalsolidarity.com/the-origins-of-border-crossing-and-border-policing/