



**TOPIC: Angel Island & The Chinese Exclusion Act**  
**GRADES: 7 - 12**

### **BACKGROUND ESSAY**

After years of anti-Chinese sentiment, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the first in a series of laws explicitly used to limit immigration based on race. This law barred Chinese laborers from entering the country, only allowing Chinese students, teachers, travelers, merchants, and diplomats to still apply for admission. This also marked the start of required immigration documents that the Chinese were required to hold on to their person to avoid deportation.

The 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed records verifying citizenship and provided a back door through which non-exempt Chinese could enter America. With these records missing, many Chinese residents claimed to be born in America and could, therefore, claim to be American citizens and bring their children into the United States. Additionally, some Chinese bought fraudulent documentation for their children in China that stated they were the children of Chinese Americans, sending them to the United States to be raised as American citizens. This practice was called “paper sons” and “paper daughters”. In response, the Bureau of Immigration detained and interrogated Chinese immigrants on Angel Island Immigration Station, located in San Francisco Bay.

Angel Island opened in 1910 and closed in 1940. The majority of its detainees were Chinese. Men and women were separated and children under twelve stayed with their mothers, with no communication privileges granted among separated family members. The Chinese who passed

the medical examination waited in their dormitories to be interrogated. Privacy was minimal inside the detention barracks with guards stationed outside of the locked doors. Women and children were occasionally allowed to take supervised walks around the island, but men were denied this privilege. Unlike the Ellis Island immigration inspection station in New York City, where the average wait was between three to five hours, the Chinese immigrants' confinement ranged from two weeks to six months. Some had to wait as long as two years.

Though we can no longer speak to the majority of these approximately 175,000 Chinese detainees, we can still hear their voices through poems they wrote on the walls of the detention barracks totaling to over 200 poems. Many recurring themes expressed in their writing revolved around hope, fear, frustration, anguish, anxiety, depression, homesickness, loneliness, and despair. These walls provide a window into the detainees' experiences and reveal the human cost of immigration, lessons we must all remember.

### **VOCABULARY**

- **Detainee:** A person who is held in prison or similar custody, usually for political reasons.
- **Detention:** The act of holding someone in custody, or be in the state of being held in custody.
- **Discrimination:** The distinguishing of someone as being inferior, especially on the basis of creed, age, sex, or race.
- **Immigration:** The process of moving from one country to live permanently in another.
- **Interrogate:** To formally examine a detainee through questioning, especially regarding specific information that they may be holding secret.
- **Nationality:** A person's national identity, usually in regards to birth, allegiance, or naturalization.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Do you think the interrogation process on Angel Island was fair? Why or why not?
- In this clip, Connie Young Yu states, "Angel Island has been called the Ellis Island of the West. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Ellis Island with the Statue of Liberty represents immigrants being welcome. Angel Island meant exclusion. It meant interrogation. It was a place to be feared." Do you agree with her statement?
- Recall the times in U.S. history when other people have been confined. How did their confinement compare to that of the Chinese? What were the causes, societal responses, immigrants' responses, similarities, differences?
- In this clip, Connie Young Yu shares how her mother and sisters, who were American citizens, were separated from their mother, who was detained on Angel Island. She states, "One of the harshest punishments is to separate parents from their children. It's the detention of people who are struggling to survive." How would you respond to her statement based on your new understanding of Angel Island and past and present United States immigration policy?

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **Activity 1: Angel Island Poetry**

Many of the Chinese immigrants were confined on Angel Island from two weeks to six months. Some were detained for as long as two years. Some immigrants composed poems and wrote or carved them on the walls to pass the time. The students will understand the emotions and experience of the Chinese confined on the island by studying Angel Island poems.

Ask students to search for four poems from Angel Island. A good place to find poems is on the [Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation page](#).

- Have students read, reflect and respond to those poems. They will choose words with impact, then reflect what these words reveal about the detainees' experience on Angel Island.
- Ask students to write down the following about the poems they found:
  - Impactful words
  - What does this reveal about life on Angel Island?

Divide the class into groups.

- Have each individual share their answers within the group.
- Have each group select a captain to summarize the answers for the rest of the class.

The teacher will facilitate a class discussion about the poems.

- Group captains report their group answers to the class.
- The class discusses common themes from the poems.

### **Extension Activity: Ellis Island vs Angel Island**

Ellis Island is less than a mile from Liberty Island. Ellis Island housed the immigration station for European immigrants.

- *The New Colossus* is a sonnet by American poet Emma Lazarus which is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island, New York.
- Lookup *The New Colossus* at [The National Park Service website](#).

Angel Island has been called the Ellis Island of the West. After reading the Angel Island poems and *The New Colossus*, reflect on what you have already learned about Ellis Island and explain how the Angel Island experience compared to that of the Ellis Island immigrants' experience? Of present-day immigrants?

### **Activity 2: Angel Island Interrogations**

Students will begin to understand how challenging the Angel Island interrogations by answering the Angel Island interrogation questions below. These questions are similar to the ones Chinese immigrants answered on Angel Island.

Have students go home and ask a relative/friend the same questions.

Finally, they will verify as many of the actual answers as they can. For privacy reasons teachers should not look at students' answers.

Angel Island Interrogation Questions:

- Name the closest grocery store.
- How many houses are on your block?
- What direction does the front door of your house face?
- How many windows are in your home?
- What is the color of the floor in your home?

The teacher will debrief this activity with the classroom, asking students:

- How many answers did you get correct?
- How many answers did you match with your relative/person you live with?
- Which answers do you think would be the most important to match if you were being interrogated on Angel Island? Why?
- Based on your experience, do you think the interrogation process on Angel Island was fair? Why or why not?

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

California State Parks, State of California, "[Explore - Angel Island State Parks.](#)"



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