

Teaching U.S. Immigration Series

Teaching Chinese Immigration in the 19th Century: Lesson Plans and Resources

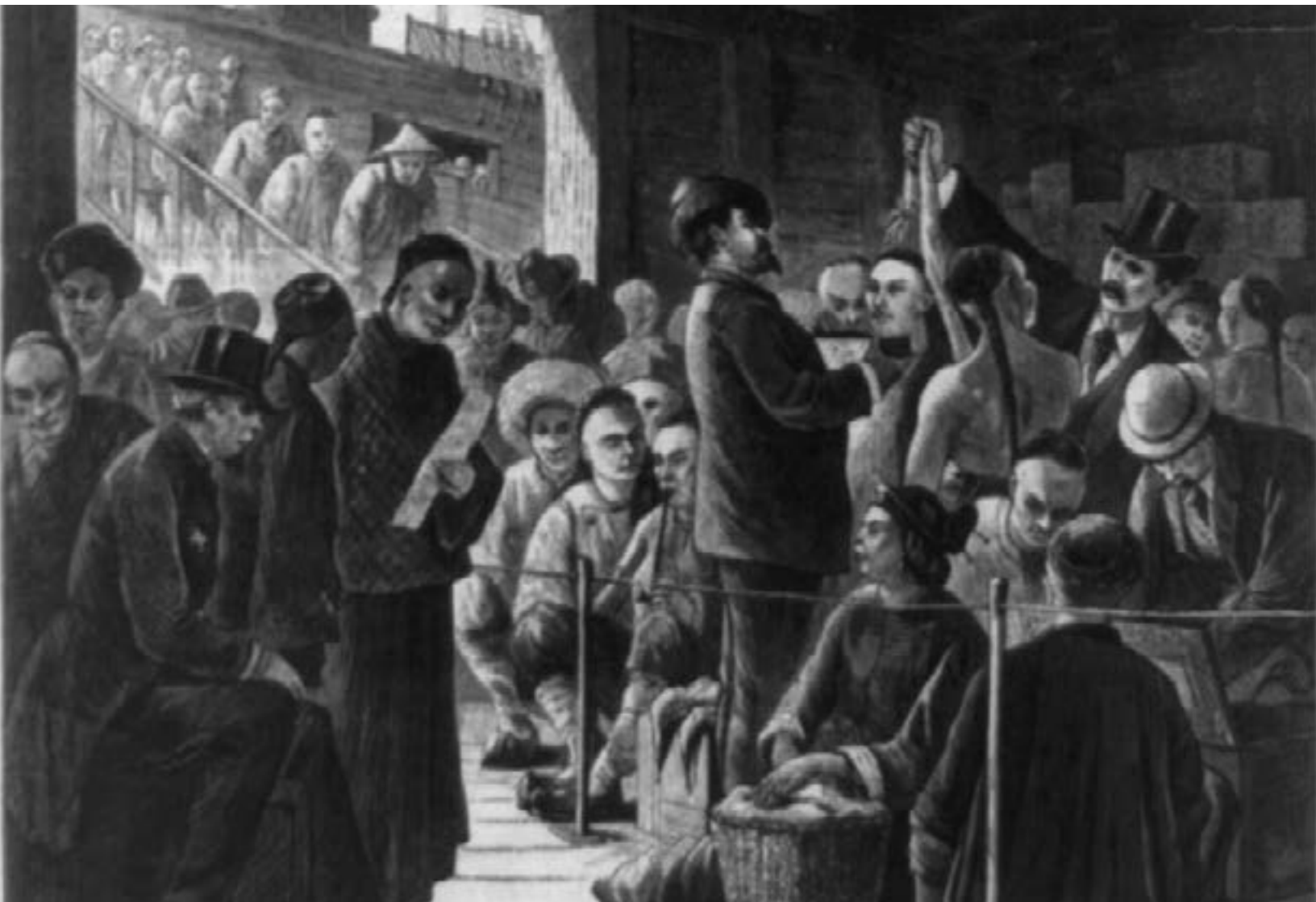


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INTRODUCTION

Humans have been migrating throughout every place and time in history. Since migration touches every part of life, it is relevant to almost any subject matter. The Teaching U.S. Immigration Series was created to make it easy for you to explore and incorporate immigration as it relates to the social studies topics you are already teaching.

This guide looks at the dynamic Westward Expansion period of U.S. history and examines the social, economic and political impacts of the wave of immigrants from China to the United States at that time.

The California Gold Rush in the late 1840s attracted migrants from all over the United States and almost every continent. Harsh economic conditions in southeastern China, as well as China's proximity to California, led about 24,000 young Chinese men to travel to California looking for ways to support their family. The vast majority did not find success in the gold mines but instead found work in other areas of the growing economy. In particular, the construction of the nation's first transcontinental railroad in the 1860s created a large need for labor that many of these immigrants were able to fill. By the time it was completed, the majority of the railroad's workforce were immigrants from China.

Throughout this time period, immigrants from China faced discrimination on a personal and then governmental basis. They faced the ultimate form of discrimination when the groundbreaking Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made it impossible for immigrants from China to live and work in the United States legally. Even without full access to the U.S. judicial system, Chinese immigrants used the courts to challenge some of these laws. In rare cases new legal precedent was set with far-reaching impact on citizenship and equal rights that can still be felt today.

Each lesson plan is designed to be flexible and adaptable based on the needs of your class. They can be used separately, together or in conjunction with any of the other recommended lessons and resources provided. The lesson plan "Immigrant Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad" invites students to explore the perception and treatment of Chinese and Irish immigrant workers on the Transcontinental Railroad through primary and secondary sources. The lesson plan "19th Century Legal Battles over Chinese Immigration" asks students to research some of the laws and court cases that systematically denied rights to Chinese immigrants.

All the lessons in this guide ask students to do the critical work of making connections between history and present day. Students will find that many acts of exclusion, resistance and inclusion from the 1800s still reverberate today, and they may be inspired to consider their place in this history as it continues.

Not included in this guide is any discussion of the physical violence perpetrated against Chinese immigrants during this time. In case it is brought up by students or you choose to address it, here are major events to be aware of:

- [the Chinese Massacre of 1871](#)
- [the Rock Springs Massacre in 1885](#)
- [the 1885 Chinese Expulsion of Tacoma](#)
- [the attack on Squak Valley Chinese laborers in 1885](#)
- [the Seattle Riot of 1886](#)
- [the Hells Canyon Massacre in 1887](#)

Please discuss with all students the importance of engaging respectfully and sensitively with this material. Be sure to avoid singling out Chinese American, Asian American or immigrant students during these discussions, and do not allow other students to do so. If you do have students in class whose identities might connect them personally to the content, consider meeting with these students outside of class time to check in and preview material with them.

Lesson One

Immigrant Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad

EDUCATOR NOTES:

This lesson plan invites students to learn more about the immigrant workers, particularly Chinese and Irish, who built the Transcontinental Railroad, a critical piece of American infrastructure in the 19th century. These activities would fit well into a study of Westward Expansion, the Gold Rush or the building of the American railroad system. If students are in need of background information, please distribute the [Historical Supplement](#) at the back of this guide. Hopefully, students will have the opportunity in the course of their study to appreciate the vast economic and social impact of the railroad's completion, perhaps made even more significant by the hard work and sacrifice from foreign-born laborers.

If students have not discussed immigration in class for a while, it always enhances their connection to the content to set aside time for considering and sharing students' own family stories of migration or moving. We also recommend the picture book *Coolies*, by Yin, which would make a wonderful classroom read-aloud (even for older students) before or after the activities in this resource.

This lesson plan includes a guided research section in which students explore a variety of primary and secondary sources followed by one or more related recent articles to support students in making connections to the present. For each topic, we have curated suggested sources, and we encourage teachers to read through and make selections (or determine how many options to offer) based on the age and skill level of their students.

Many of the primary source documents have racist depictions of Chinese and Irish immigrants that may shock and upset students. Invite students to make connections to racism and xenophobia that is occurring in the present day, but be sure to create a safe environment with the option to work with less provoking material and opportunities for students to process their reactions to the images. For more tips on teaching difficult topics, read [Handling Tough Topics in the Classroom](#) from Education World.

Lesson Plan:

Immigrant Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad

OBJECTIVES

- Students will use primary and secondary sources to learn about the immigrant workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad.
- Students will draw connections between immigrants in essential roles in the past and present, including public perception, treatment, and resistance to discrimination.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How were the Chinese and Irish immigrants who built the Transcontinental Railroad perceived and treated?
- How much has America's reliance on and treatment of immigrant workers changed in the last 150 years?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Grade 6-8

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9](#)

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Grade 9-10

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9](#)

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Grade 11-12

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#)

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

MATERIALS

- Copies of or access to article: [Descendants of Chinese Laborers Reclaim Railroad's History](#) and/or equipment for students to listen to the recording
- Copies of or access to the photo by Corky Lee from the above article
- Copies of or access to the “Champagne Photo.” More information on the original “Champagne Photo” can be found from the [National Park Service](#), and a large version can be found through the [National Archives](#).
- Physical or electronic copies of [Note-Catcher: The Immigrants Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad](#), available at the end of this lesson
- Copies of or access to a varied selection of primary and secondary sources about the Chinese and Irish workers on the Transcontinental Railroad (see suggested resources under Guided Research)
- Copies of or access to recent articles relating to immigrants working in essential roles (see suggested resources under Immigrants in Essential Sectors)

ACTIVITIES

Opening:

As a class or independently, have students read this article or listen to the radio segment: [Descendants of Chinese Laborers Reclaim Railroad's History](#) from NPR. Ensure that students can closely examine both the original “Champagne Photo” and Corky Lee’s 2002 recreation, on a device or in print.

Discuss students’ reactions and questions. Consider asking:

- ▶ What surprised you? What did not surprise you?
- ▶ How does this fit into what you already know about the Transcontinental Railroad?
- ▶ How do you think this photo and other “iconic” photos affect how history is remembered?
- ▶ Where else in history have a group of people been left out of mainstream memory and storytelling?

Guided Research:

Tell students that today they will be doing some research to learn more about the immigrant workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad.

Ask students: Based on the article/radio segment, the photographs, and what you already know, what questions do you have about the workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad?

Give them a minute to think. On the board or in a shared space, create a list of student questions. Let students know that for their research, there are several questions you'd like them to find the answers to, but that they should also choose one or more additional questions from this list to focus on.

Distribute [Note-Catcher: The Immigrants Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad](#), and give students time to read through the questions and add their own question(s) in the last section.

For student research, give students (or groups) copies of or electronic access to the following resources. If you like, you can add or narrow down sources, or allow students to conduct their own internet research.

Images from the Library of Congress:

- ▶ [The Great Fear of the Period](#)
- ▶ [The Chinese Question](#)
- ▶ [Work on the Last Mile of the Pacific Railroad](#)
- ▶ [The Mortar of Assimilation](#)
- ▶ [The First Blow at the Chinese Question](#)
- ▶ [In the Clutches of the Chinese Tiger](#)

Articles:

- ▶ [Workers of the Central and Union Pacific Railroad \(PBS\)](#)
- ▶ [The Chinese Workers' Strike \(PBS\)](#)
- ▶ [The Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad \(Social Studies for Kids\)](#)
- ▶ [When America Despised the Irish \(History\)](#)
- ▶ [Building the Transcontinental Railroad: How 20,000 Chinese Immigrants Made It Happen \(History\)](#)
- ▶ [A Railroad Record That Defies Defeat \(Southern Pacific Bulletin, 1928\)](#)
- ▶ ["Forgotten by society"—how Chinese migrants built the transcontinental railroad \(The Guardian\)](#)
- ▶ [Chinese Laborers and the Construction of the Central Pacific \(Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum\)](#) (Note: This is a more challenging and informative article for older students, including many primary sources. It can also be printed from pages 44-60 of [this PDF](#).)

After students have had time to work, discuss answers to the questions you selected. Encourage students to clarify for each other, dig deeper into sources and raise additional questions.

Guide students, as appropriate for their age, to make connections to present-day. Go back through each question and ask if anything they've learned reminds them of things they might have heard about immigrants today. Consider asking:

- ▶ Are there some jobs or professions that employ high numbers of immigrants? Why? Some potential answers to the first question include truck drivers, doctors and farm workers.
- ▶ Are immigrants, or some immigrant groups, sometimes portrayed in similar ways to how the Chinese and Irish were in the 1800s?
- ▶ What do you know about working conditions for immigrants in professions in which they dominate?
- ▶ What do you know about how immigrants have stood up against unfair treatment or conditions?
- ▶ What makes immigrants particularly vulnerable to unfair treatment?

Note: This conversation may turn to undocumented immigrants. Be clear with students that in the mid-1800s immigration was largely unrestricted. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first major piece of legislation that created the concept of "illegal" immigration.

Immigrants in Essential Sectors:

In class or for homework, ask students to read about immigrants currently working in jobs that are critical to the country's functioning, as the Transcontinental Railroad was, including infrastructure, agriculture, health care, etc.

We recommend this report: [US Foreign-Born Essential Workers by Status and State, and the Global Pandemic](#) from the Center for Migration Studies. Excerpts could be used for younger readers.

Alternate or supplemental readings might include [Immigrant Workers are Important to Filling Growing Occupations](#) from the Center for American Progress, the [Immigrant Essential Workers](#) presentations from The Immigrant Learning Center and [Immigrant Essential Workers are Crucial to America's COVID-19 Recovery](#) from *fwd.us*.

[Quick Immigration Statistics: United States](#) from The Immigrant Learning Center will give students an overview of key statistics on immigration in the United States.

In writing or in discussion, ask students to consider:

- ▶ What important roles are immigrants playing in American economy and society, regardless of immigration status?
- ▶ Based on the article(s), do you think immigrants working in these jobs are being treated fairly? What would you change if you could?
- ▶ What connections do you see to the workers on the Transcontinental Railroad?

If possible, we also recommend sharing examples with students of immigrants standing up against unfair treatment in connection to the Chinese workers' strike in 1867. The article [A Strike to Show What America Is Like Without Immigrant Workers](#) from *The Atlantic* describes and contextualizes a 2017 "Day Without Immigrants."

MORE RESOURCES

The Contributions of the Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers

Lesson plan and video from Asian Americans Advancing Justice (Grades 7-12).

The Impact of the Transcontinental Railroad

Lesson plan, including media and primary sources, from the National Endowment for the Humanities (Grades 6-8).

Construction of the Union Pacific Railroad

A collection of 203 photographs by Andrew J. Russell.

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Note Catcher: The Immigrants Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad

1. Why was the Transcontinental Railroad workforce made up of mostly immigrants? Why were owners reluctant to hire Chinese workers initially?
2. What was the public perception of Chinese immigrants? What was the public perception of Irish immigrants?
3. How were Irish and Chinese railroad workers treated?
4. How did Chinese workers resist unfair treatment?
5. Additional question(s) for research:

Lesson Two

19th Century Legal Battles Over Chinese Immigration

EDUCATOR NOTES:

This lesson plan and resource guide aims to support teachers in exploring the legal, social and economic struggles faced by Chinese immigrants in the second half of the 19th century and some of the ways in which they resisted discrimination. Students will need some background on the time period in order to understand the context into which immigrants were arriving. If a refresher is needed, please refer to our short Historical Supplement, [The First Wave: Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 1800s](#), at the end of this guide, or this [six-minute video of Columbia Professor Mae Ngai on C-SPAN](#).

The lesson plan introduces students to two major court cases and three major laws, culminating with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which specifically targeted Chinese immigrants. Also included is a reading that summarizes the important Chinese contributions to the United States in the years since they first began arriving and the text of a 2011 official Senate apology for the discrimination faced by Chinese immigrants.

In the resource guide, we encourage educators to give students the chance to examine two landmark Supreme Court cases that began with Chinese immigrants filing lawsuits against discrimination. We've included recommended lesson plans and resources for each court case. These would also be excellent opportunities for student individual or group research.

Lesson Plan:

Anti-Chinese Legislation

OBJECTIVES

- Students will research one of five recommended significant laws and court cases targeting Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s and share their findings with a group.
- Students will examine all five significant laws and court cases to draw conclusions about history and make connections to the present day.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How did Americans respond to Chinese immigration during this time period?
- How have Chinese immigrants contributed to the United States despite discrimination?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Grade 6-8

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9](#)

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Grade 9-10

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9](#)

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Grade 11-12

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

MATERIALS

- Copies of the [Historical Supplement](#) at the end of this guide, or access to this six-minute video of [Columbia Professor Mae Ngai on C-SPAN](#)
- Copies of primary source images to display (listed under Activities)
- Copies of handout: [Anti-Chinese Legislation and Rulings](#) at the end of this Lesson
- Computers or other internet-connected devices for student research
- Copies of or access to the New American Economy article: [Transcontinental Railroad at 150: The Contributions of Chinese Immigrants and Chinese Americans](#)
- Copies of or access to text: [Senate Resolution 201](#)

ACTIVITIES

Opening:

Share with students the following images (on a display board, as a gallery walk, with copies at tables or as a digital image gallery, etc.).

- ▶ [Chinese immigrants at the San Francisco custom-house](#)
- ▶ [A street in Chinatown](#)
- ▶ [To the President of the United States, and to the Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled](#)
- ▶ [Which color is to be tabooed next?](#)

Ask students to think and write silently about each image: What do you notice? What questions do you have?

Discuss students' observations and reflections.

Ask: What topic do you think this lesson will be about?

Introduce the lesson topic to students giving additional background information as necessary.

Share with students the two guiding questions and ask them to make predictions or use what they already know to try and answer them. Let students know they will be checking their knowledge and learning more today.

Jigsaw:

Assign students to "home groups" of five to six. Distribute the [Anti-Chinese Legislation and Rulings](#) handout and explain that they will be learning about five significant examples (three laws and two court cases) of government-sponsored discrimination against Chinese immigrants after they began arriving in significant numbers around 1850. These fit a pattern of many more specific and local laws and incidents (especially in California, where many Chinese arrived) which were explicitly unwelcoming to Chinese immigrants.

Let students know that they will be responsible for researching one of these laws or rulings and bringing their information back to their home group. Give students a few minutes to divide up assignments.

- ▶ *People v. Hall* (1854)
- ▶ Act to Prohibit the “Coolie Trade” (1862)
- ▶ Page Act (1875)
- ▶ *In re Ah Yup* (1878)
- ▶ Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)

Once each student knows their responsibility, have them rearrange into “expert groups,” meeting with students from other home groups to collaborate on researching their assigned law or case. Students will need internet-connected devices for research and will need to access primary texts as well as several other reputable secondary sources for context. Suggested sources, if needed, are at the end of this guide.

1. How did this law/ruling discriminate against Chinese immigrants?
2. What was the justification or stated reason for this law/ruling?
3. Relevant direct quote from the law/ruling:
4. When was this law/ruling repealed or replaced?

Give students time to complete their research and record the results. When all expert groups are finished, have students reassemble into home groups and share out what they learned, giving time for all students to fill out their handout and ask each other questions.

DISCUSSION

Discuss findings with students. Suggested discussion starters:

- ▶ What patterns did you see among the five laws/rulings?
- ▶ What surprised you? What didn't surprise you?
- ▶ Do you see any connections to events you know of that came before or after this time period?
- ▶ How does this relate to modern times with respect to who makes the laws and who is governed by them?
- ▶ How is the law used, in history and present-day, to keep power structures in place? What does it take to overcome this?

Chinese American Contributions

Tell students that despite this significant discrimination, which has continued to varying degrees, Chinese immigrants have made many contributions to the United States in addition to building the Transcontinental Railroad. Either in class or for homework, ask students to read this article from New American Economy: [The Transcontinental Railroad at 150: The Contributions of Chinese Immigrants and Chinese Americans](#). Students should use whatever tools and structures they are familiar with to support their reading, but we suggest a 3-2-1 written response:

- ▶ 3 interesting or important facts
- ▶ 2 things that surprised you
- ▶ 1 major takeaway from the article

Extension: Congress Apologizes

In 2011 and 2012, Congress issued an official apology for the discrimination endured by Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Assign students to read [the text of the Senate resolution](#) and either respond in writing or discuss:

- ▶ Do you think this official apology was necessary?
- ▶ As a senator, would you have voted for or against the resolution?
- ▶ What do you think were the effects of this resolution?
- ▶ Can you think of anything else that could be or needs to be done?

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Anti-Chinese Legislation and Rulings

| | How did this law/ ruling discriminate against Chinese immigrants? | What was the justification or stated reason for this law/ ruling? | Relevant direct quote from the law/ruling: | When was this law/ ruling repealed or replaced? |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| <i>People v. Hall</i> (1854) | | | | |
| Act to Prohibit the "Coolie Trade" (1862) | | | | |
| Page Act (1875) | | | | |
| <i>In re Ah Yup</i> (1878) | | | | |
| Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) | | | | |

Resource Guide:

Chinese Resistance and Landmark Court Cases

GUIDING QUESTION

What was the impact of Chinese attempts at fighting discrimination via the court?

BACKGROUND

As laws and courts were used to restrict Chinese immigration, some Chinese used these same systems to challenge discrimination and in some notable cases set powerful legal precedent still relevant today. Two of these cases were *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886) and *The United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898). Both of these cases would be rich material for a student research project or an excellent use of additional class time using some of our recommended resources below.

Note: Other court cases through which Chinese immigrants fought for their rights include *Lin Sing v. Washburn* (1862), *Ho Ah Kow v. Nunan* (1879) and *Wong Wing v. United States* (1896).

YICK WO v. HOPKINS (1886)

Background Summary:

[From C-SPAN's Landmark Cases resource:](#)

“Many Chinese migrated to the U.S. during the Gold Rush and owning laundries was a common business among these immigrants. Yick Wo was one such laundromat. Most Chinese laundries were in wooden buildings and in 1880, San Francisco’s board of supervisors passed legislation banning laundries from operating in wooden buildings without a permit. Following the law’s passage, every single Chinese owned laundromat was denied permits while only one white owner was denied a permit. The owner of Yick Wo laundry was charged with violating the law after he continued to run his business without a permit. The Supreme Court overturned his conviction and ruled it was unconstitutional to discriminate against a group of people in passage or enforcement of legislation. This decision opened the doors for immigrant integration in American society and established precedent for subsequent cases with similar issues affecting non-citizens.”

Resources:

- [Yick Wo v. Hopkins. 118 U.S. 356 \(1886\)](#)
- [Lesson Plan: Landmark Supreme Court Case: Yick Wo v. Hopkins \(1886\)](#)
This lesson plan from the National Cable Satellite Corporation (C-SPAN) includes a series of short videos exploring the background and impact of the case.
- [Lee Yick: Equal Justice Under Law](#)
This lesson plan from the Bill of Rights Institute uses a narrative to immerse students in the case and supports them to think about justice in their own lives.

THE UNITED STATES V. WONG KIM ARK (1898)

Background Summary:

From Re-Imagining Migration's article [Wong Kim Ark, the 14th Amendment and Birthright citizenship in the U.S.](#):

“Citizenship in the United States is granted not solely by ancestral lineage, but by jus soli, or birthright citizenship, as well. In other words, if you are born in the United States, you have a legal right to citizen[ship] regardless of your parents, and their citizenship status. That right was affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *The United States v. Wong Kim Ark* in 1898. Wong Kim Ark was born in the U.S. and had traveled to China several times. In 1894, when he was returning from one of those visits, he was denied entry to the U.S. on the grounds that he was not a citizen. Ruling in his favor, Justice Gray explained, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”

Resources:

- [United States v. Wong Kim Ark . 169 U.S. 649 \(1898\)](#)
- [Immigration and Birthright Citizenship: Wong Kim Ark and the 14th Amendment](#) and [Wong Kim Ark, the 14th Amendment and Birthright citizenship in the U.S.](#)

These resources from Re-Imagining Migration connect this court case to modern discussions of citizenship rights and include media and teaching ideas.

MORE RESOURCES:

Suggested sources for student research:

- *People v. Hall* (1854)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Immigration History)
 - ▶ [The full opinion](#) (Caselaw Access Project)
- Act to Prohibit the “Coolie Trade” (1862)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Immigration History)
 - ▶ [Act to Prohibit the “Coolie Trade” text](#) (Asian American Digital History Archive)
- Page Act (1875)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Immigration History)
 - ▶ [Page Act text](#) (San Diego State University)
- *In re Ah Yup* (1878)
 - ▶ [Excerpt from Pacific Coast Law Journal article, 1878](#) (Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center)
 - ▶ [Case text](#) (Public.Resource.org)
- Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Our Documents Initiative)
 - ▶ [Chinese Exclusion Act primary documents](#) (Library of Congress)

Chinese Exclusion & Community Resistance

This two-lesson unit from the Immigrant History Initiative navigates the difficult waters of Chinese Exclusion while centering the efforts of community activists to resist racism. Students will practice primary source analysis and learn defining court cases that struck back against white supremacy and xenophobia.

Asian Americans K-12 Education Curriculum

This curriculum of 36 lesson plans for grades 9-12 accompanies five episodes covering different time periods. As resources or extensions for this content, we recommend the following three:

- ▶ Episode 1, Lesson 3: Chinese Exclusion Act
- ▶ Episode 1, Lesson 5: Angel Island & The Chinese Exclusion Act
- ▶ Episode 1, Lesson 7: Racial Identity and American Citizenship in Court

Chinese Immigration, Exclusion and the Chinese-American Experience

This unit plan written for older high school students includes history content as well as two novels, *Bone* by Fae Myenne Ng and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. Students will consider how many of the same issues about the laws, economics and attitudes around immigration are still at play today.

Resources from the 1882 Foundation

This list of resources includes links to primary sources documenting anti-Chinese sentiment, including media images and descriptions of violence and other tactics, and a useful legal timeline.

Lectures in History: 19th Century Chinese Immigration

In this 48 minutes video, Professor Krystyn Moon teaches a class about anti-immigration laws in the 19th century, focusing on Chinese immigrants. She describes how an influx of Chinese immigrants on the West Coast during the 1800s led to both local and federal legislation attempting to limit or ban immigrants from China.

Chinese Immigrants to the US: Past and Present

This resource and discussion guide from Re-Imagining Migration asks viewers to consider factors related to Chinese immigration in the context of other immigrant groups and time periods.

Becoming American: The Chinese Experience

This PBS video with a discussion guide from Facing History and Ourselves describes the ways the first arrivals from China in the 1840s, their descendants and recent immigrants have “become American.”

Chinese Immigrants in the United States

This Migration Policy Institute article profiles the Chinese immigrant population in 2020, including distribution, demographics, education, employment and citizenship.

U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative Amid Trade Tensions

This survey and report from Pew Research Center visualize American’s beliefs and opinions about China in 2019.

Densho Encyclopedia

This brief overview of the Chinese experience in the United States can be used in conjunction with or instead of the [Historical Supplement](#) handout provided in this guide.

The First Wave: Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 1800s

The first large wave of Chinese immigration to the United States began during the California gold rush in 1848 and ended abruptly in 1882 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. This first wave was marked by an entrepreneurial spirit, as Chinese immigrants, fleeing harsh conditions in China, adapted and found ways to earn livings despite challenging circumstances. Yet this period was also defined by virulent anti-Chinese racism on both personal and societal levels.

In the 1850s, the prospect of striking it rich drew many to the West Coast. Pushed from China by political and social instability, many Chinese men ventured to the “Golden Mountain,” a nickname for the United States. By the mid 1850s, Chinese immigrants made up 20 percent of the mining population in the United States, making them the largest non-White group. Many quickly became disillusioned. Mining was difficult and uncertain, and locals were hostile. Lacking money to bring over their families or return to China, many Chinese immigrants were stranded. Faced with language barriers and racial discrimination, they opened businesses in mining towns in professions that were typically looked down on by locals as “women’s work,” such as laundry and cooking.

During this time, U.S. railroad companies were vying to expand across the country as quickly and cheaply as possible. In 1863, the Central Pacific Railroad Company broke ground on the first transcontinental railroad, a pivotal piece of infrastructure that shortened the coast to coast travel time from several months to about a week. Facing a labor shortage, the company increased their recruitment of Chinese immigrants, who worked for lower pay and were less likely to unionize than most other workers. It was dangerous work and the pay was low, but it gave many Chinese immigrants with little work experience or English ability a means to enter the workforce. By the mid 1860s, the company was recruiting laborers directly from China. By 1867, almost 90 percent of the Central Pacific workforce was Chinese. It’s estimated that as many as 20,000 Chinese immigrants worked on the Transcontinental Railroad.

The Chinese experience in the United States in the 1800s was also marked by hostility and violence. Discriminatory laws and regulations were passed targeting Chinese Americans and immigrants. Chinese Americans, and White business owners who employed Chinese laborers, successfully challenged many of these laws and ordinances in court. However, an economic depression in the United States in the 1870s further fueled anti-Chinese sentiment and the misperception that the Chinese were “stealing” jobs from White citizens.

On December 17, 1882, the United States passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act, which halted all immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years and banned Chinese immigrants already living in the United States from becoming citizens. The Act was renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1902. The Act is significant as it's the first time U.S. immigration policy banned immigration from a specific country. While the number of immigrants from China did increase significantly during the 1800s, it is important to note that immigrants from other countries were not subject to the same discrimination. When the Act was passed in 1882, there were 110,000 Chinese in the United States, mainly concentrated in California where they made up 10 percent of the population but 20 percent of the working population. By contrast, nearly 1.5 million Germans immigrated to the United States in the 1880s, and about 250,000 arrived in 1882 alone. While there still was limited immigration from China after the Chinese Exclusion Act, it was greatly curtailed. The Act remained in effect until 1943.

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, there was a period in the late 1800s called the “Driving Out” in which Chinese immigrants were driven out of their communities and subjected to large-scale violence. According to the Library of Congress, “Racial hatred, an uncertain economy, and weak government in the new territories all contributed to this climate of terror and bloodshed. The perpetrators of these crimes, which included Americans from many segments of society, largely went unpunished” ([Library of Congress, Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Chinese: Intolerance](#)).

With railroads completed, the Gold Rush over, and facing social and legal discrimination, many Chinese immigrants moved together to urban areas. Now called “Chinatowns,” these communities provided safety, community, work opportunities and a vibrant culture.