

Lesson Plan: The Angel Island Poems

Learning history from primary sources

Grade level	High school
Subject areas	History, English, Humanities, Social Studies
Time	40-90 minutes
Topics	Chinese Exclusion Act history, Chinese immigration experience through Angel Island, learning history through primary sources
Lesson focus	What do the Angel Island poems reveal about the experiences of the Chinese detainees who wrote them?
Primary sources	Selected poems carved into the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station by Chinese detainees, as translated by Genny Lim, Marlon Hom, and Charles Egan, from <i>Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940</i> , second edition, University of Washington Press, edited by Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung.

Objectives

Students will:

- Examine primary sources for clues to historical realities.
- Learn how literary and historical allusions can communicate meaning.
- Discover important aspects of the Chinese immigration experience at Angel Island in the early 1900s.
- Engage in text-based discussion of literary source material.
- Look for parallels between this past episode of history and the present day.

Background

Have the students read “My Bridge Across the Sky” (Ng-Bridge_LessonPlan-Essay.pdf) in advance of this lesson.

Preparation

1. Choose the small group or whole class option.
 - Small groups: Class divided into small groups, each of which gets its own set of poems to analyze.
 - Whole class: The entire class analyzes all the poems.

- If you choose the whole class option, decide if you'll distribute printouts of the poems or only project them.
2. If the choice involves distributing printed versions of the poems to students, decide which versions to use:
 - Ng-Bridge_AngellIslandPoems-bare.docx – just the bare text, without explanations of the historical/literary allusions, so that it will be up to the students to spot when there's information they need and ask for it.
 - Ng-Bridge_AngellIslandPoems-notes.docx – with endnotes explaining the historical/literary allusions.
 - Ng-Bridge_AngellIslandPoems-hints.docx – with key phrases to which the students should pay particular attention underlined.
 3. Print out copies of the poems to distribute to the students.
 - For the small group option: enough copies of each poem for all the students in a small group.
 - For the whole class option: enough copies of each poem for every student in the class. (Or the poems can simply be projected from the provided slideshow, no printouts needed.)
 4. Print out Ng-Bridge_AngellIslandPoems-answers.docx for yourself.
 5. Set up the slideshow Ng-Bridge_AngellIslandPoems.pptx.

I. Classroom sequence: Modeling the procedure

Model the practice of finding clues to historical realities in primary sources by projecting the sample poem (or distributing printouts of it) and analyzing it. (The “-answers” document, Ng-Bridge_AngellIslandPoems-answers.docx) contains notes on the poem.

II. Classroom sequence: Discussing the poems

A. Small group option:

1. Divide the class into small groups.
2. Divide the 6 pages of poems among the groups.
3. Give each group enough printed copies of their assigned poems for every member of the group.
4. Give the groups time to discuss among themselves what they can learn, guess, or even just wonder about the detainee experience based on the lines of their poems.
5. If they're using the -bare versions of the poems (with no explanatory notes) tell them that if they encounter references in the lines that puzzle them, they can call you over for a private explanation.

6. Call the class to order and project the poems one by one, calling on the group that studied it to share their findings, prompting them if necessary with questions.
7. Ask the class at large if anyone has anything to add.

B. Whole class option

1. Project the poems or distribute copies of them all to every student.
2. Go through the poems one by one.
3. For each poem, ask the class if there are any references in the poem that puzzle them.
4. Explain any historical context or literary allusions necessary to understanding the poem.
5. Ask the group what they can learn, guess, or even just wonder about the detainee experience based on the lines of the poem.

III. Classroom sequence: Close

Ask the class:

- Was there a line or passage of poetry that was especially powerful to them?
- Did they learn anything about the Chinese immigration experience that surprised them?
- Are there any parallels between this episode from the past and the present day?

IV. Classroom sequence: Optional Extension

1. Inform the class that Ellis Island was the immigration station on the East coast, but that it was very different from Angel Island.
 - Angel Island was about the Chinese Exclusion Act.
 - Ellis Island was about the Statue of Liberty's "Give us your tired, your poor..."
 - Optional aside: the Ellis Island mission—the importing of cheap and relatively powerless workers to fuel the industrial revolution—was not as purely beneficent as it's often portrayed. Nevertheless, the difference in approaches and in the treatment of immigrants who passed through each station remains stark.
 - The typical processing time for Ellis Island was hours, vs. weeks or months for Angel Island.
 - The Ellis Island admittance rate (the percentage of immigrants admitted into the country) was 98%.
2. Ask the students to guess the admittance rate for the Chinese through Angel Island.
3. Reveal that the Angel Island admittance rate was 93%, less than that of Ellis Island as should be expected but still surprisingly high. (Note: the figure includes those who were initially rejected but won admittance on appeal, which could take a year to process.)
4. Ask the students to speculate on why it was that high.
5. Explain the historical reasons:

- U.S. based Chinese newspapers and mutual aid societies that advocated on behalf of detainees.
 - Possible help from the Chinese interpreters.
 - Possible sympathy from White station staff.
 - The biggest reason: a secretive network that recorded the answers given by supposed stateside relatives and smuggled them into the station via Chinese kitchen workers who commuted to the island from San Francisco, so that detainees would know the right answers to give when they were interviewed.
6. Conclude with the lesson of this history: that an unfair, oppressive system can be resisted by citizen action. (With more present-day parallels.)

Supplementary Files

Ng-Bridge_LessonPlan-Essay.pdf – The essay “My Bridge Across the Sky”

Ng-Bridge_AngelIslandPoems-[bare/notes/hints].docx – Student copies of the 12 poems used in this lesson plan, with varying levels of help.

Ng-Bridge_AngelIslandPoems-answers.docx – The answer key, including a sample poem for modeling the process to students.

Ng-Bridge_AngelIslandPoems.pptx – Slideshow of the sample poem and 12 student poems.

The most recent versions of this lesson plan and its supplementary files can be found at:

www.AngelIslandNovel.com/lesson-plans

Additional Reading

Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940, second edition, University of Washington Press, edited by Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. Translations of all the Angel Island poems, oral histories by former detainees, and summaries of the history.

Bridge Across the Sky, Atheneum Books for Young Readers, by Freeman Ng. A YA verse novel based on the Chinese immigration experience through Angel Island.

Ng-Bridge_LessonPlan-BridgeCharacters.pdf – Lesson plan for discussion of the YA verse novel *Bridge Across the Sky*.