

Lesson Plan: Illegal Immigration of Chinese into El Paso, 1907

Analysis of Testimonies

Intended Audience

The intended participants are high school students in an honors history class studying 19th and 20th century immigration into the United States. The activities described in this unit are for academically-focused students. They may need to be adapted and simplified for students who are not in an honors seminar.

Background

The discovery of gold in California in the middle of the 19th century brought many immigrants to the American West. These included many Chinese Americans and Chinese Nationals. As gold became harder to find, many of the Chinese turned to other businesses, most notably restaurants and laundries. Also, many Chinese were employed in building the trans-continental railroad. After the completion of the railroad, many of these Chinese found other work - some in agriculture and others in the businesses mentioned above. White westerners began to resent Chinese as jobs became scarce. Chinese were seen as foreign opportunists taking jobs away from white Americans. In El Paso laws were passed in 1882 to restrict the use of opium. Although the laws were rarely enforced they were mainly used to prosecute Chinese.

On May 6, 1882, the United States Congress passed the first of several Chinese Exclusion Acts. This law made it illegal for Chinese laborers to immigrate to the United States for 10 years. Subsequent laws extended this law, and it was not until quotas were established in 1943 that quota laws replaced the Exclusion Acts. Many Chinese found to be in the United States were forcibly deported. Although the law did not block non-laborers from immigrating extremely few were allowed.

The Chinese Exclusion Acts were originally enforced in major ports. This led to the development of smuggling operations via Mexico. Smugglers would bring immigrants to Mexico, and then transport them to Juarez. A network of Chinese in Juarez would give these immigrants a place to live and pay extremely low-wages for work while they waited for an opportunity to enter the United States. From Juarez, the preferred method of entering the United States was to hop a boxcar to El Paso. Therefore, much of the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Acts involved inspecting trains entering the United States. There were also “safe houses” awaiting immigrants when they crossed the border. Illegal immigration of Chinese resulted in a network of people profiting from transporting and protecting immigrants. These included operators of large shipping lines that arranged transportation to Mexico. The owner of one these lines was Ng Hok Fong of the Chinese Commercial Company who is mentioned in your documents.

It will be useful to know that all dates are given according to the Chinese calendar. “K. S.” refers to the year of the reign of the contemporary emperor, who came to power in 1875 AD. Thus, 1875 = K. S. 1, 1876 = K. S. 2, etc.

The Documents

Statement made by Chow Chan, Chinese arrested in a box car in the joint freight yards at El Paso, May 10, 1907. Testimony of Chinese Arrested for Illegally entering the United States, May – July 1907 (E.TX 8); Records of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – El Paso District (RG 85); National Archives at Fort Worth.

Statement made by Chow Quon, Chinese arrested in a box car in the joint freight yards at El Paso, May 10, 1907. Testimony of Chinese Arrested for Illegally entering the United States, May – July 1907 (E.TX 8); Records of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – El Paso District (RG 85); National Archives at Fort Worth.

Statement made by Jin Tun, Chinese Laborer, at El Paso, Texas, June 21, 1907, June 21. Testimony of Chinese Arrested for Illegally entering the United States, May – July 1907 (E.TX 8); Records of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – El Paso District (RG 85); National Archives at Fort Worth.

Statement Made by Lee Gee, Chinese arrested in a box car in the joint freight yards at El Paso, May 10, 1907. Testimony of Chinese Arrested for Illegally entering the United States, May – July 1907 (E.TX 8); Records of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – El Paso District (RG 85); National Archives at Fort Worth.

Statement Made by Li Dong Bong, Chinese arrested in a box car in the joint freight yards at El Paso, May 10, 1907. Testimony of Chinese Arrested for Illegally entering the United States, May – July 1907 (E.TX 8); Records of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – El Paso District (RG 85); National Archives at Fort Worth.

Statement made by Sun He, arrested at El Paso, Texas, May 2, 1907. Testimony of Chinese Arrested for Illegally entering the United States, May – July 1907 (E.TX 8); Records of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – El Paso District (RG 85); National Archives at Fort Worth.

Statement made by Yee Ging, arrested at El Paso May 16, 1907, May 15, 1907 (date discrepancy in original). Testimony of Chinese Arrested for Illegally entering the United States, May – July 1907 (E.TX 8); Records of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – El Paso District (RG 85); National Archives at Fort Worth.

United States vs. Jin Tun (Gin Toon), June 2, 1908; Case number 893; Equity Case Files Relating to Deportation of Chinese 1892-1915 (E. 48W081B); Records of the U.S. District Courts for the Western District of Texas (El Paso Division); Record Group 21; National Archives at Fort Worth.

Standards Correlations

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

- Era 6 The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900)

- Standard 2-Massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity.

Teaching Activities

Time Required:

This lesson is designed to take four two-hour class sessions, or approximately 8 classroom hours. It can be abbreviated by teaching either Part I or Part II separately, or by assigning some of the preparation as homework.

Materials Needed:

Copies of the Documents

Day 1

Part I - Reenactment

1. Distribute the statements made by Chow Chan, Chow Chan, Jin Tun, Lee Gee, Li Dong Bong, Sun He, and Yee Ging.
2. Give the students a few minutes to look over each interrogation, so they can get a sense of how the interrogation procedure worked.
3. Break the students into seven groups, and assign one interrogation to each group.
4. Give each group about 15-20 minutes to read through the statement and determine how they are going to reenact the interrogation. Point out to the students that none of these immigrants spoke English, so they may wish to have somebody portray an interpreter. Of course, warn against offensively comical imitations of the men speaking Chinese.
5. Have each group reenact the interrogation.

Part II. Questions

1. After each reenactment, have the students write down their impressions.
2. After all seven groups have performed, ask the students the following questions. They should write down their response for further evaluation in group sessions.
 - What are the common elements in the testimonies?
 - Why do you think Li Dong Bong, Sun He and Jin Tun try to show that they came from San Francisco and not Mexico?
 - What events / details are described differently?
 - Why do you think the stories are not the same?
 - What do you think really happened?

3. Break the students into groups and have them discuss their responses to these questions.
4. If there is time, you may want to go over the first three of these questions in a seminar format.

Day 2

Part I. Creative interpretation

1. Start with students in their groups from the previous day.
2. Have students return to the question of what really happened.
3. Each group will reenact the events as they imagine them.
4. Discuss the plausibility of each of the reenactments. Students should be prepared to cite the original documents to demonstrate how they came up with their interpretation.

Part II. Additional statements - reenactments

1. Distribute the other statements by immigrants who were arrested.
2. Begin re-enactments. Since students are familiar with the way the interrogations work by now, they should not have to prepare for more than a few minutes.

Part III. Seminar discussion

1. Write the following questions on the board:
 - What themes do you see in these statements?
 - Do you think these people are telling the truth?
 - Why, or why not?
 - What do you think really happened?
 - In the case of Yee Ging, why would he pretend to be simple-minded?
 - Do you think he is pretending or not?
 - In the case of Jin Tun, do you think he was born in San Francisco?
 - Why or why not?
 - If he is telling the truth, why do you think he cannot describe San Francisco better?
2. Have students write down their impressions.
3. Discuss these in seminar discussions.

Day 3

1. Tell the students that you have additional information regarding one of the cases – that of Jin Tun. This information includes a photograph, subpoena and testimony transcripts. Divide them into groups and distribute part of the case file to each group. Students are already familiar with this case, because they read the transcript of the original interrogation. Instruct students that these are “raw” documents – they are going to have to determine which documents need further analysis and which are largely records of formal proceedings that do not require detailed analysis.
2. Have students catalog and summarize the documents they have received. They should include quotations from each of the longer selections. They may need some guidance in identifying arrest warrants, subpoenas, etc. Give them sufficient time to complete this task.
3. Give groups time to review the documents for the class.

Day 4

1. Each group should help lead seminar discussion. Give each group a chance to generate questions based on their selections.
2. Guide the discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Do the witnesses in the case seem credible? Note: students will already be suspicious of witness testimony from reading the interrogations of arrested individuals.
 - If they are not credible, what motivation would they have to lie? Note: it will be useful for you to know that some of the people giving testimony during these trials were bribed. Do not volunteer this information before your students have a chance to come up with this explanation themselves.
 - Do you think Jin Tun came to the United States illegally?
 - What do you think happened to him? Note: we do not have the deportation order for Jin Tun, but he most likely was deported.
 - Did you notice there were at least three spellings for immigrant’s name? What problem does this present for somebody researching historical documents?
 - What do you think it was like for Chinese immigrants?
 - What surprises did you find in the documents?

Evaluation

Students will be evaluated based on their written work and participation. Their participation grade will be determined from their involvement in group discussion, preparation, reenactment and seminar discussion. It may be useful to distribute a questionnaire to the students to poll them on the participation level of other group members.

You may also want to assign a reaction paper based on the following questions (or on any other questions that the students want to pursue further):

- What do you think it was like to be a Chinese illegal immigrant?
- What have you learned about immigration from this unit?
- What have you learned about witness testimony from this unit?

If you had a chance to do research into primary documents, what questions would you ask?

Resources

Chin, Ko-Lin. *Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. (Deals largely with recent immigration, but has some information on historical periods.)

Dickey, Gretchen. "Downtown Opium Dens Attracted Many." *Borderlands* 23 (2002 – 2003): 3, 7. http://www.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/21_opium.htm

Perl, Lila. *To the Golden Mountain*. New York: Benchmark Press, 2003.

Portillo, Jaime and Joanna Atilanoc, "Chinese Immigrants Helped Build the Railroad in El Paso." *Borderlands* 19 (2000-2001): 3. http://www.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/19_chinese.htm

Lesson researched and written by Jeffrey Bateman of Chandler Preparatory Academy in Mesa, Arizona.