

**LESSON 9:  
EXPLORING ORAL HISTORIES OF ANGEL ISLAND IMMIGRANTS****Goals**

Students will read oral histories as one way to get information about the past to gain a deeper understanding of individual experiences of Angel Island immigrants during early twentieth century America. Students will analyze work in cooperative groups to question and hypothesize about the experience of Angel Island immigrants. Students will make personal connections and comparisons to the text.

**Grades**

5-12

**Time**

1-2 class periods

**Materials**

Student handouts of oral history (excerpts from the book *Island*) and matrix, overhead transparency of matrix, overhead projector and pens.

**Standards**

California History Social-Science Content Standards

**Procedure**

1. Assemble students in mixed ability groups. (3-4 students)
2. Activate thinking: Share with students this mystery quote:  
“They told me that anyone who comes to *Gam Saan* [“Gold Mountain,” the colloquial Chinese term for the United States] will make money fast and go home a rich man.”  
Who might have said this? How old do you think the person was? What do we think we can learn about this person by hearing this quote? Reveal to the students the source of the quote (Mr. Wong, a Chinese community member who was on Angel Island at age 12 in 1933.)
3. Explain to the students that we have more primary sources in the form of statements made by Angel Island immigrants called oral histories. Oral histories are written, videotaped, or audio recorded words that document the history of a person or group, from the perspective of that person. Share with students that they will continue learning about Angel Island immigrants by examining short oral histories which reflect experiences at Angel Island.
4. In groups, students will read a variety of oral history excerpts. As a group, students will complete the matrix, recording their interpretation of the feelings of the immigrant on the

matrix. After completing the matrix, have students reflect on questions they now have, and thoughts/feelings they may be experiencing.

5. Distribute the oral history handouts to the students. Model reading and summarizing an oral history excerpt. Model recording the name, age, date oral history was recorded. Also model for them how they might be able to gain the information to answer the two questions:
  - Describe the feelings of the immigrant. (How do you think this person felt at the time?)
  - Why did they feel this way? (What evidence do they give in their testimony?)
6. Give them time to work on read on their own and fill in their matrices. Also point out that students can also make notes and underline key phrases that will help them remember what they read.
7. Debrief: After groups have completed their matrices, together students will then discuss what they have read. They might choose to read sections to each other. What words did they not understand? What things were unclear? Then, each group will choose one immigrant they found particularly interesting. One reporter will share the name and age of the person they chose, and summarize their experience and feelings. Circulate around the room to find out what each is doing, answer any questions, provide suggestions on how to proceed, and see if there is anything they might not understand.
8. As students share about different individuals, facilitate discussion about some of the similarities and differences in their experiences. What did you learn by reading the oral histories? How was the experience of some immigrants the same? Different? What questions do you now have? Have students create a Venn Diagram of the similarities and differences of two immigrants thoughts and experiences.

### Assessment

Give credit for student participation in group discussions and completed Venn Diagram.

### Extension

Writing and Role Play Activity – Imagine you were able to go back in time and actually talk to the Angel Island immigrants as they were at the station. Pretend you are an interviewer, and write a dialogue between yourself and the Angel Island immigrant. Try to make your interview realistic by using information from the oral histories. You must have at least three questions, and three responses in your dialogue. You will perform your dialogue with a partner in front of another class pair/in front of the class.

Source: Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim and Judy Yung. *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980.

*Prepared by Hidie Y. Kato with the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation.*

**STUDENT HANDOUT**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Oral Histories from Angel Island**

Name	Name
Age                      Year	Age                      Year
Describe the feelings of the immigrant	Describe the feelings of the immigrant
Why did they feel this way?	Why did they feel this way?
Name	Name
Age                      Year	Age                      Year
Describe the feelings of the immigrant.	Describe the feelings of the immigrant.
Why did they feel this way?	Why did they feel this way?

## STUDENT HANDOUT

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Oral Histories from Angel Island

**The Voyage & Arrival**

“My father had a birth certificate on file, but he didn’t use it. Instead he used a student paper since he studied at church. He paid \$1,500 to a fellow villager who had reported he had four sons in order to buy entry papers for me. I came over with one of the ‘brothers.’ Another one had already been admitted into the country. When they interviewed the two younger brothers, the facts were conflicting. That’s why I stayed there three and a half months. I had to appeal the decision. After leaving the village, I went to Hong Kong and stayed at a *gam sann jong* (need definition) owned by people named Quan. I stayed there ten days to take care of the paper work for the passage. At that time all I knew was that *gam saan haak* (“traveler to the Golden Mountain”) who came back were always rich. They never told me about confinement on Angel Island. That’s why people spent all their money to get here. They’d spend up to \$1,500 to buy papers to come, thinking in a year or two they’d make it all back. There were some people who were deported. I heard that some of them committed suicide aboard the ship.”

- Mr. Quan, age 16 in 1913 (*Island*, p. 48-49)

“They told me that anyone who comes to *Gam Saan* will make money fast and go home a rich man. Anyone who comes to America is well respected in China. My family pushed me to come. They wanted me to make a better living. They couldn’t send my older brother because he was too old to match the age of my uncle’s paper son. I

studied [coaching papers] for a whole summer at school. It included many, many generations. I had to remember everyone’s name, the birthday, even if they passed away, when. And you had to know different points of the village, what it looked like. I remember I had an English cap that we picked up in Hong Kong and inside the cap, my father hid some coaching notes, so that once in awhile, I could refresh my memory. But I never had a chance to look at them because you’re among people all the time and you don’t trust anyone. There was no private place where I could be alone to study them. One time, they were play catch with my cap and they didn’t understand why I was so upset. I was scared.

- Mr. Wong, age 12 in 1913 (*Island*, p. 44)

“When we first came, we came to the administration building for the physical examination. The doctor told us to take off everything. Really though, it was humiliating. The Chinese never exposed themselves like that. They checked you and checked you. We never got used to that kind of thing—and in front of whites.

- Mr. Lee, age 20 in 1930 (*Island*, p. 108)

**The Detainment**

“When we first arrived, we were told to put down our luggage and they [Immigration Station officials] pushed us towards the buildings. More than 100 of us arrived. The men had their dormitories and the women theirs. They assigned us beds and there were white women to take care of us. When we returned from the dining hall, they locked

the doors behind us. Once you're locked in, they don't bother with you. It was like being in prison. Some read newspapers or books; some knitted. There was a small fenced in area for exercising, sunning and ball-playing. There were windows and we could see the boats arrive daily about 9:30 or 10 a.m. Once a week, they allowed us to walk out to the storage shed where our luggage was kept. We could write as many letters as we wanted, but they examined our letters before mailing them. The same for letters coming in. There were good friends, but there were also those who didn't get along. There were arguments and people cried when they saw others who were fortunate enough to leave, especially those of us who had been there a long time. I must have cried a bowlful during my stay at Angel Island. Most of the women were *Sze Yup* (four district southwest of the Pearl River Delta: *Enping, Kaiping, Taishan, and Xinhin*). Because I was *Lung Dou* (an area in the Zhongshan district), I could not understand most of them. We were all in the twenties, thirties, or forties; no one older. New arrivals came every two weeks—about thirty of forty. Most left after three weeks. There were about twenty or thirty appealing their cases like me. Three or four applicants of every ten would end up appealing. But I was there the longest and always the one left behind.”

- Mrs. Chan, age 23 in 1939 (*Island*, p. 72)

“We stayed in the dormitory most of the time. There wasn't much recreation. At most, there one or two ping pong tables at the end of the room. There were over 100 people living there and all of us were young and wanted to play. Some gambled at *mah jong* and tossing coins. There was also a basketball court outside open certain hours during the day, but most people read for

recreation. There were at least five different newspapers from San Francisco. Day or night there was always someone playing the phonograph at least until 12 midnight.”

- Mr. Ng, age 15 in 1931 (*Island*, p. 74)

“For meals, we went to the big dining hall. At the sound of the bell, we went down together, about twenty of us in a group escorted by two guards. The melon was chopped in pieces thrown together into a big bowl that resembled a wash tub and left there for you to eat not as you wished. They just steamed food till it was like a soupy stew. After looking at it, you'd lose your appetite. There was cabbage, stewed vegetable, pork, bits of stewed meat of low quality, that kind of thing. Sometimes, we would receive roast ducks and chickens from relatives in San Francisco. But you could only eat a little of it. There was no place to store it, or place to heat it up, so we heated it on top of radiators and ate some of that.”

- Mrs. Jew, age 33 in 1922 (*Island*, p. 79)

### The Interrogation

“During the interrogation, if the inspector pursued a point, the situation would become tense. They even asked me where the rice bin was kept. Can you imagine? If your father had said the left side and the son, the right side, that won't do. In our days, we didn't have any electricity, just kerosene lamps. And you know, a kerosene lamp's a moveable object. So what was I supposed to say if they asked where was the lamp kept? My father might have said the middle of the table or the end of the table. I didn't know. I couldn't understand why they asked such questions. They asked about everything and anything. When I was serving as a witness for my brother, they as me how far the *shameen* (Cantonese pronunciation of

Shamian, an island on the Pearl River at Guangzhou, where the U.S. Consulate used to be located) was from the wharf. I said, "Very close." The next time I was interrogated, they asked me the same question and I replied the same, "Very close." They then said, "Okay, come and get your brother tomorrow." They were trying to trap me. I was interrogated only once for several hours in one day. I knew that most people who were interrogated in the morning would be landed the next day. It was bad if no news came by then."

- Mr. Poon, age 18 in 1927 (*Island*, p. 116)

"I waited three weeks before I was interrogated. I was questioned three times and asked my name, my village, population or the village, the neighbors living up and down the lane and their occupations. After each question, the interrogator would stop for a long time and look at my expression before continuing. It took more than an hour for each interrogation. The inspector's attitude was non-threatening and pleasant, but I felt frightened and threatened anyway, having listened to people who returned to the village and tell of interrogations."

- Mr. Low, age 25 in 1922 (*Island*, p. 117)

"Sometimes the interrogator would try to trip you, like I told him the village's altar of worship was on the east side of the village. At the next session, he said my papa said it was on the west side. But I still said the east side, and they all laughed."

- Mr. Wong, age 12 in 1933 (*Island*, p. 117)

### Poetry

"The people at Angel Island wrote poems all over the walls, where the hand could reach,

even in the bathroom. Some were carved, but most were written in ink. There were many carved in the hall leading to the basketball court, because the wood there was softer. It was not easy finding space on the wall to compose a poem, so sometimes when I thought of something lying in bed, I would bend over and write a poem under my bed which was made of canvas. Sometimes, when someone didn't like what another person wrote, he would deface the poem, saying, 'What a smart aleck, trying to write poetry like the others.' Sometimes, people fought over poems. A lot of people there didn't know how to write poetry. They weren't highly educated, but they knew some of the rules of poetry. You can't say that the poems were great, but they expressed real feelings. They were works of the overseas Chinese and therefore part of the history of the overseas Chinese."

- Mr. Ng, age 15 in 1931 (*Island*, p. 136)

"In general, the feelings were: one and eagerness to leave and go on to San Francisco, and two, to get the interrogation over with. Until then, no one was very happy. At the time, we did not understand America's immigration laws. We were told that we had to come through Angel Island. Most did not think to protest. If the food was bad, we put up with it. Our treatment wasn't cruel, so we just endured the period and hoped for it to pass. Only those who were detained and separated from relatives for a long time and who were going through appeal process after spending a lot of money to come in the first place suffered. They were the ones who wrote the angry bitter poems. But looking back now at how the United States treated Chinese and Asian immigrants, we can see how unequal and unfair the treatment was."

- Mr. Dea, age 26 in 1939 (*Island*, p. 137)