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Creating Communities in California: The Chinese American Experience

An NEH Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshop

Below is the course reader for the 2022 *Creating Communities in California: The Chinese American Experience* workshop. This course reader is designed to supplement your workshop experience and provide additional information on our landmark visits. Please choose one reading per day to read ahead of the workshop. This will help you engage in deeper conversations about the landmarks.

Download all reading materials in a single pdf [here](#).

Sunday / Day 1: The Lure of Gold

Guiding Question: What drew Chinese immigrants to California? How did Chinese immigrants contribute to mining the gold fields?

Reading	Overview	
Susan Lee Johnson, "Dreams That Died," in <i>Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush</i> (New York: Norton, 2000), 237–274.	Johnson's book is an important social history of the California Gold Rush. In this chapter she looks at the consolidation of Anglo-American dominance in the gold rush, and the tactics they used to push Chinese miners off claims in the 1850s.	Download
Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, "Migration in the Pre-Exclusion Years," in <i>A New History of Asian America</i> (New York: Routledge, 2014), 27–37	Lee provides a broad overview of early Asian immigration to the United States, focusing on Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Asian Indians, and Filipinos and their motivations for migration. Chinese migrants were diverse, and included free and coerced laborers, merchants, peasants, and sojourners and permanent settlers. Lee looks at the various "push" and "pull" factors that motivated migration. This section focuses on the Chinese, read the rest of the chapter, if you want to learn about the migration of other Asian American nationalities.	Download
Mae Ngai, "Chinese Gold Miners and the 'Chinese Question' in Nineteenth Century California and Victoria" <i>The Journal of American History</i> , Vol 101. No 4 (March 2015), 1082-1105.	Ngai offers a transnational view of Chinese labor systems and anti-Chinese politics during the Gold Rush era. She compares the Australian and American anti-Chinese movements in the 1850s and 1860s to demonstrate the historical contexts informing racial politics.	Download

Monday / Day 2: Chinese Labor Meets the Landscape

Guiding Question: How did Chinese immigrants contribute to building the Transcontinental Railroad? At what cost? What does it mean to say what the railroad “cost”? Are there other ways of figuring the human cost of railroad growth into our histories? How do these stories shape our understanding of the railroad and its meaning?

Reading	Overview	
<p>Gordon H. Chang, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and Hilton Obenzinger “Introduction,” in <i>The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad</i> (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1–24.</p>	<p>Chang, Fishkin, and Obenzinger, scholars who are part of Stanford’s Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project, give an important overview for their book on Chinese railroad workers. They look at who these workers were, why they came, what they experienced, how they lived, their spiritual beliefs, what they did after the railroad was completed, and their place in cultural memory. By focusing on Chinese workers, the authors argue that our understanding of the contexts and perspectives of the history of the American West change.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Gordon H. Chang, “Introduction,” “The High Sierra,” in <i>Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad</i> (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 1–14; 98–120.</p>	<p>Chang provides a full account of the Chinese laborers who worked on the Transcontinental Railroad, and their lived experiences. This excerpt from the book specifically explores the daily life of Chinese rail workers in the High Sierras.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Ronald Takaki, “Gam Saan Haak: The Chinese in Nineteenth-Century America,” in <i>Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans</i> (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 84–87.</p>	<p>This selection identifies the crucial part Chinese laborers played in the construction of the railroad. Takaki asserts that the railroad was a Chinese achievement as their labor and skill completed the tunnels through Donner Summit. This short selection offers additional discussion on working conditions and includes a description of Chinese laborers striking.</p>	<p>Download</p>

Tuesday / Day 3: Chinese Immigrants in Agriculture and the Beginning of Exclusion

Guiding Question: How do the experiences of Chinese laborers change our understanding of California farming? How can we see the physical environment as a landmark? What were the justifications given for Chinese exclusion? What were the consequences of creating the “yellow peril” stereotype?

Reading	Overview	
<p>James Motlow, “Preface,” “Introduction: The Significance of Locke in Chinese American History,” and “Ping Lee,” in Jeff Gillenkirk and James Motlow, <i>Bitter Melon: Inside America’s Last Rural Chinese Town</i> (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1997), 9–25, 29–42.</p>	<p>These selections provide important context for understanding Locke, the last surviving rural Chinese town. This book is composed of personal histories of Locke’s residents, important primary sources to help understand the conditions of Chinese laborers in agriculture and show how these Chinese laborers established their community in Locke.</p> <p>*Note, if it works out, we will be meeting James Motlow in Locke</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Erika Lee, “Introduction,” “Part I: Closing the Gates,” in <i>At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943</i> (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 1–22.</p>	<p>These excerpts from Lee’s work lay out her main argument that the U.S. should not just be seen as a nation of immigrants, but also as a gatekeeping nation, and that this changes how we look at the U.S. She says we need to look at how the Chinese and immigration officials grappled with immigration restrictions.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Beth Lew-Williams, “Introduction: The Violence of Exclusion,” and “The Chinese Question,” in <i>The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion and the Making of the Alien in America</i> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 1–52.</p>	<p>Lew-Williams traced the background to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in this selection. She traces how people differed in their view of Chinese migration, as some wanted to exploit Chinese laborers, and others believed the Chinese were a threat to the republic. She also looks at the increased violence against Asian immigrants.</p> <p>*Beth Lew-Williams will be presenting on this topic.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Cecilia M Tsu, “‘Independent of the Unskilled Chinaman’: Race, Labor, and Family Farming,” in <i>Garden of the World: Asian Immigrants and the Making of Agriculture in California’s Santa Clara Valley</i> (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15–51.</p>	<p>Tsu explains how Chinese immigrant farmers and field hands were a central part of the agricultural landscape, even as boosters and growers tried to put forward an image of a white family farm ideal. Tsu shows how they participated in many parts of Valley agriculture, and the intense labor they performed.</p> <p>*Cecilia Tsu will be presenting on this topic.</p>	<p>Download</p>

Wednesday / Day 4: The Chinese Immigrant Experience at Angel Island & Chinatown

Guiding Question: What does it mean to consider the United States as a gatekeeping nation? How can we compare the experiences of Angel Island and Ellis Island to teach students about the tensions and contradictions of immigration policy? How did the Chinese build community despite considerable limitations?

Reading	Overview	
<p>Erika Lee, "Exclusion Acts: Race, Class, Gender, and Citizenship in the Enforcement of the Exclusion Laws" in <i>At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943</i> (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 77–109.</p>	<p>Lee articulates how immigration officials enforced the exclusion laws. Officials enforced exclusion along gendered, raced, and classed definitions of who counted as Chinese or American.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Erika Lee and Judy Yung, "'One Hundred Kinds of Oppressive Laws': Chinese Immigrants in the Shadow of Exclusion," in <i>Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America</i> (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 69–109.</p>	<p>This chapter looks at the experiences of Chinese immigrants at Angel Island, the interrogations they underwent, and their detention. It also looks at how Chinese immigrants, returning residents, and Chinese American citizens used a range of legal, political, and immigration strategies to enter and return to the United States during the restriction era.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Wendy Rouse, "Introduction: Constructing Childhood in Early Chinatown, Image versus Reality," and "Recentering the Chinese Family in Early Chinese American History," in <i>The Children of Chinatown: Growing Up Chinese American in San Francisco, 1850–1920</i> (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1–8, 42–77.</p>	<p>This book explores the experiences of Chinese children in America and what their daily lives were like. The author challenges the typical story of a bachelor-society of male Chinese immigrants by looking at the variety of family structures that existed. White Americans scrutinized Chinese families, arguing they were not the ideal family model. But Chinese families found ways to ensure the safety of their children and establish family life in San Francisco.</p>	<p>Download</p>

Thursday / Day 5: Chinese Immigrants and Immigration through the Civil Rights Era

Guiding Question: How were arguments used against Chinese immigration extended to justify other immigration restrictions in the 20th century? How did working for civil rights lead to recognition of shared histories and experiences?

Reading	Overview	
<p>Angelo N. Ancheta, "Looking Like the Enemy," in <i>Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience</i>, second edition (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2006), 61–83.</p>	<p>Ancheta looks at the experiences of Asian Americans and their encounters with civil rights laws, showing how race is bound up in the law, and how Asian Americans were racialized as foreigners. This led to particular interpretations of immigration law.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Pawan Dhingra and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, "Arrival and History" in <i>Asian America: Sociological and Interdisciplinary Perspectives</i> (Polity Press, 2014), 46-64.</p>	<p>Dhingra and Rodriguez take a sociological approach to explain the tension between the United States' need for racialized labor and its desire to remain a white nation. It highlights how Asian Americans in particular have been sought after for the labor market, yet are simultaneously identified as threats to the nation.</p> <p>*Robyn Rodriguez will be presenting on this topic.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>David Fitzgerald and David Cook-Martín. "The Geopolitical Origins of the US Immigration Act of 1965," in <i>A Nation of Immigrants Reconsidered: US Society in an Age of Restriction, 1924–1965</i> (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 83–101.</p>	<p>This chapter looks at the geopolitical origins of the 1965 immigration law, and argues that the demise of the national-origins quota system was fundamentally driven by geopolitical factors.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Diane C. Fujino and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, "Introduction: Building an Archive of Asian American Organizing Praxis," <i>Contemporary Asian American Activism: Building Movements for Liberation</i> (University of Washington Press, 2022) 3-33.</p>	<p>Fugino and Rodriguez offer the first anthology of contemporary Asian American activism. It centers organizers and activists to identify intergenerational lessons useful for today's organizers undertaking liberation work.</p> <p>*Robyn Rodriguez will be presenting on this topic.</p>	<p>Download</p>
<p>Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, "Politics and Activism in Asian America in the 1960s and 1970s," in <i>A New History of Asian America</i> (New</p>	<p>Lee details the emergence of the Asian American movement. She also traces the creation of Asian American Studies in Northern California.</p>	<p>Download</p>

Reading	Overview	
York: Routledge, 2014), 291–314.		
Mae M. Ngai, "Introduction," "Part III: War, Nationalism, and Alien Citizenship," "The Cold War Chinese Immigration Crisis and the Confession Cases," in <i>Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1–14, 169–174, 202–224.	Ngai's book looks at how the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 created a new, racialized category in immigration of the "illegal alien." In these selections, Ngai looks at how World War II created distinctions between Asian immigrant groups, and particularly how this influenced Chinese immigrants and citizens. This selection also explores the Chinese Confession Cases of the 1950s.	Download

Friday / Day 6: Challenging the “Model Minority” Stereotype and the Common Good

Guiding Question: How did the stereotype of Asians as the “model minority” impact the experiences of Chinese Americans? How do the experiences of Chinese Americans help inform our understanding of contemporary American life, culture, and politics? How does a study of the Chinese American experience provide perspective for understanding the immigrant experience, and the processes of creating community in the United States? How do we take this learning and apply it to our classrooms?

Reading	Overview	
Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, “The Watershed of 1965 and the Remaking of Asian America,” in <i>A New History of Asian America</i> (New York: Routledge, 2014), 315–334.	Lee explores how post-1965 immigration gave new life to the model minority stereotype, and its influences on Asian American culture.	Download
Ellen D. Wu, “Introduction: Imperatives of Asian American Citizenship,” “America's Chinese,” in <i>The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1–10, 111–143.	Wu looks at the transformations that contributed to a stereotype of Asians as the “model minority.” These excerpts look at how Chinese Americans embraced Cold War nationalism and traditional values, which led to this change where Asian Americans were seen as model citizens.	Download