

Chinese Immigrants and Visual Culture

1. A rationale for the proposed unit

This unit will be taught after we study the transcontinental railroad. At this point, students will have knowledge of the Gold Rush as well as the building of the transcontinental railroad. They will also have knowledge of California's state symbols, including the state seal. This is a Social Studies / Visual Art unit which will give students insight into the experience of Chinese immigrants to California, whose influence is still strong in our society today. Students will also have spent a full semester working on writing strong paragraphs, and will have written several multi-paragraph essays.

2. Skill and content objectives

Objectives:

- Students will learn the story of Chinese immigration from the Gold Rush to the Chinese Exclusion Act – why they came, what they did while they were here, how they were received, and why they were eventually excluded.
- Students will learn about the meaning of certain colors and symbols in Chinese culture, and compare this with their meaning in Western culture.

California Visual Arts Standards

- 1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (e.g., color, shape/form, line, texture, space, value), emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment.
- 3.1 Describe how art plays a role in reflecting life (e.g., in photography, quilts, architecture).
- 3.2 Identify and discuss the content of works of art in the past and present, focusing on the different cultures that have contributed to California's history and art heritage.
- 4.4 Identify and describe how various cultures define and value art differently.

California Social Studies Standard

- 4.4.3 Discuss immigration and migration to California between 1850 and 1900, including the diverse composition of those who came; the countries of origin and their relative locations; and conflicts and accords among the diverse groups (e.g., the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act).

California Language Arts Standard

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

3. Detailed lesson plan

Day 1 – Introduction – The Chinese in California

Hook (15 minutes)

- On the first day, we will explore the story of Chinese immigration to California. I will begin by posting these pictures:



- For each picture, I will have students first discuss in groups what they notice. Hopefully they will bring up the fact that the figures in the images are Chinese (or Asian, or not white). They are also shown doing manual labor, and in the first image there is a clear divide between the white and Chinese workers. I will then have students discuss any questions that might come to mind, such as: Where do the people come from? Why are they doing such difficult work? Why are there only Chinese people in the last two images? What time period is this and why were these images created? Students will write these questions down to see if they can answer them by the end of the week.

Student Activity (30 minutes)

- Next, I will have students read the short overview of Chinese immigration at PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/chinese-immigration/>
- We will then discuss the major ways in which Chinese immigrants influenced California history, as stated in the article.
- I will then assign students to one of four research groups. Each group will answer the questions below on a worksheet, using their Chromebooks to find the information:
- Group 1: Why did so many Chinese immigrants come to California in the late 1800s? How did they get to California? What did they do once they arrived in California? What is “Gold Mountain”?
- Group 2: What was the involvement of the Chinese in the building of the transcontinental railroad? Why were they commonly used to perform dangerous tasks? Who hired them, and why were they hired? How have we (or have we?) commemorated their contribution?
- Group 3: How did white Americans react to the Chinese workers? What do images such as this say about attitudes towards the Chinese? How were Chinese forty-niners treated?
- Group 4: What was the Chinese Exclusion Act? What was its purpose? Why was it passed? How long did it remain law? What effect did it have?
- When time is up, students will get into groups with one member from each research group. They will share their findings with their classmates and thus create a fuller picture of early Chinese immigration to California.



Closing (10 minutes)

- Students will informally write their thoughts on their learning in their Social Studies journals, then share with the students around them.

Day 2 – Chinese Art

Hook – (15 minutes)

- I will post a picture of the California flag and have students discuss the symbolism of the images and colors. I will then do the same with the California state seal.
- I will then post examples of colorful Chinese art and ask students to guess what the colors and symbols mean.



Student Activity (20 minutes)

- Students will use the following websites to learn about traditional Chinese color meanings and symbols:
- <http://www.chinasage.info/symbols/colors.htm>
- <https://www.color-meanings.com/color-symbolism-in-chinese-culture-what-do-traditional-chinese-colors-mean/>
- https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Chinese_symbols_1109.pdf
- http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Chinese_Symbols_and_Art_Motifs
- I will then ask students to choose one color and symbol and find an example of a Chinese work of art that uses it (e.g. by Googling “Chinese painting bamboo”)
- Students will then share their work of art with each other and explain the one symbol or color that is represented in it.

Whole Group (10 minutes)

- I will ask a few students to share what they learned about symbols and colors in Chinese culture.
- I will then ask students how their findings might compare or contrast with Western ideas of these symbols and colors. How are they the same and how are they different?
- I will tie this lesson to that of the previous day by asking the students how immigrants must feel when they arrive in a place with a completely different culture. Do you give up your old culture and try to adopt the new one? Do you try to save your old culture for fear of losing it?

Closing (5 minutes)

- Students will write down three symbol or color meanings that they learned in class, as well as any other thoughts on the lesson in their Social Studies journals

Day 3 – Field Trip – Chinese American Museum

- I will take my students on a field trip to the Chinese American Museum. While there, students will need to complete a scavenger hunt answering questions about the exhibits, such as:
 - What was this building before it was a museum?
 - What types of things were sold here?
 - Give an example of a traditional Chinese medicine.
 - Name three items brought to the United States by immigrants on display in the museum.
 - About how big is the current Chinese population of California?
 - What was the name of the Chinese community that competed with New Chinatown?
 - Which actress's dress is on display on the second floor?
 - What is the meaning of the canvas bags hung over the courtyard?
 - On returning to school, we will go over the answers to the scavenger hunt and discuss how the exhibits at the museum tie into the history of Chinese immigration we have been discussing. We will also discuss the works of art on display and how they reflect or differ from traditional Chinese visual culture.
- Students will reflect on the day in their Social Studies journals.

4. A plan for assessing student achievement

Day 4 – Final Project

- Students will use their newfound knowledge of Chinese immigration and Chinese visual culture to create an image that represents Chinese contributions and history in California.
- We will review what we learned in the previous three days by looking again at the images we viewed and reading our Social Studies journals.
- I will explain that students will need to be thoughtful about the symbols and colors they choose to represent this community and this period of California history. I will give them this context for creating the image: If we were to create a mural representing Chinese immigrants to California in the 19th century, how would you design it? How would you represent the culture? What elements of the photographs and Chinese artwork would you incorporate? How will you show what life was like for Chinese immigrants? What colors and symbols will you use?
- Students will have access to paper, crayons, markers, and colored pencils. They will create their image two-dimensionally on a piece of paper.
- After they are finished with their image, students will compose a final essay of two paragraphs. In the first paragraph, students will reflect on what they learned during the week. I will be looking for their understanding of Chinese immigrants' contributions to California history and their eventual exclusion, as well as understanding of the visual art we discussed in class. The second paragraph will explain their image in detail, including the symbols and colors they chose and why they were chosen.