



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2026 Volume III: Asian American History and the Making of the U.S. Immigration System

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## Navajo Nation and Asian American Histories Together

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### Introduction/Rationale

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The history of Chinese immigration and today's immigration issues are barely covered in schools. It is not surprising; our Navajo Nation students only know what is shared on social media or on television. Today's current events involving Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spark conversations and provide an opportunity for students to learn the history of the Chinese Exclusion Act and its importance in shaping our immigration bureaucracy today. Also, our students are not fully aware of our Navajo ancestors' Long Walk to Fort Sumner, New Mexico in the 1860s. The awareness of Asian immigrant and Navajo histories will broaden our Navajo Students' understanding of displacement and its effects. I will focus on two different historic time periods: the Asian Exclusion Era in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Hmong refugee migration in the late twentieth century. Although more than a century apart, the Hmong refugees can be compared to our own Navajo ancestors who traveled 400 miles to the Bosque Redondo reservation in Fort Sumner, New Mexico. The students can look at how human treatment of people in captivity or held at immigration facilities was similar and begin to build empathy for today's immigrants in the United States.

Using memoirs to introduce students to the experiences of Asian migrants from two different time periods makes clear that ill treatment was not just experienced by one group of immigrants. The stories of immigrants and their families also show the human will to live and persevere. By reading and discussing memoirs, students can begin to understand what immigrants might be going through today as a result of ICE operations and the deportation of family members. Featuring timelines of Asian American history and a collection of U.S. immigration laws will assist students in thinking about how some discrimination and unjust practices continue to exist today.

### Content Objectives

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Knowing Chinese American history and the history of laws restricting the rights of Chinese people in the United States is a lot to learn and put in order—the question of how the Chinese Exclusion Act even began comes to mind for non-history majors like me. Many Chinese arrived in America driven by the hope of job

opportunities. "Between 1850 and 1882, approximately 110,000 entered the United States, many for temporary sojourns but many others staying and joining the steadily increasing immigrant workforce in mining, agriculture, railroad construction, and other trades." [1] The Chinese government agreed with U.S. officials to allow the emigration and employment of Chinese laborers. China's economic downturn following the Opium Wars was the starting point of migration for many Chinese coming to America. [2] The long trip to America posed the first challenge, but the need to provide for their families propelled many to migrate. The Gold Rush in California appealed to many Chinese, though many would later find they had to endure ill and unjust treatment. The 1852 Foreign Miner's Tax, for example, stated that all miners not citizens of United States had to pay a monthly tax to be granted a license to mine in the State of California. While the law included all "foreigners," Californian officials specifically targeted Chinese miners. [3]

Companies such as the Central Pacific Railroad and the United States government accepted many Chinese laborers because of labor shortages, but the acceptance was short-lived. Once the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, California experienced economic depression as goods and labor from the east coast came flooding into California. In 1876, an attorney, Henry N. Clement of San Francisco, California, brought up the concern of Chinese immigrants and an "evil, 'unarmed invasion'... 'social, moral, and political effects' of Chinese." [4] George saw the Chinese as "evil" because of their large presence in mining towns. In the 1870s, the California Senate established a special committee to research the impact of Chinese immigration and sent its report ("An address to the People of the United States upon the Evils of Chinese Immigration") to Congress. [5]

The federal government of the United States established rules and policies to control and monitor entry into American territory beginning with the 1875 Page Act. This Act kept Chinese immigrants out based on gender and labor status by excluding contract laborers and immigrants who were thought to be immoral or guilty of sexual misdeeds. [6] In addition to keeping laborers out, it was considered a felony to import women into the U.S. for prostitution. In the eyes of leaders in California a good family dynamic was interpreted as a family with one husband married to one woman and prostitution threatened to undermine family stability. Officials' claims of prostitution forced Chinese women traveling to join their husbands in the U.S. to prove that they were the legally married wives of Chinese men working in U.S. As a result, many women were denied entry on the claim of prostitution. Even today, many immigrants have to face such unfair labeling practices which prevent their entry to America. The use of federal power to prevent entry has continued into other decades in America and up to our present day.

In our seminar session, we discussed the U.S. government initially issued a ten-year ban on the migration of laborers in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act but also created exempt classes which included Chinese merchants in America. [7] Many merchants used this exemption to their advantage. A merchant had to show that the purpose of the visit was to work and send money home. Heather Ruth Lee's article on restaurant ownership states that businesspeople from China had to verify their status as a merchant and not a laborer. As Lee shows, how to define a "merchant" however was in constant dispute during the exclusion era. [8] Other acts came into play after the 1882 Exclusion Law which formed a decades-long "Asian Exclusion Era," such as: 1907 to 1908 The Gentlemen's Agreement pertained to the Japanese and Koreans, 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone pertained to South Asians, the 1924 Johnson Reed Act provided a comprehensive overhaul of U.S. immigration policies which confirmed Asians remained excluded, and the 1934 Tydings - McDuffie Act which pertained to the Philippines. All these federal policies built upon the legal precedents set by the earlier 1875 Page Act and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

## Southeast Asia

The displacement and migration of the Hmong to the U.S. occurred in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century after the end of the Vietnam War. Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer* narrates how the Hmong people had to migrate away from their homelands many times throughout their history. Websites such as the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS)[9] are useful in providing a clear timeline of the Hmong people's history dating much further back. The Hmong timeline from 4,000-3,000 BCE shows that the Hmong people originated near the Yellow and Yangtze rivers in China. The Hmong were known to be great at cultivating rice, and people nearby used the rice. Imperial China, however, suppressed the Hmong. The Miao Rebellion (1795-1806) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) caused many Hmong to travel to the mountains of Southeast Asia. Today, this area of Southeast Asia has become the countries known as Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

In 1893-1940, the Lao leaders and the French colonial rulers taxed the Hmong living in the highlands of Laos and controlled them extensively. During World War II, the Hmong people of Laos were divided into two groups because of clan conflicts.[10] One group stayed with the French and the Royal Lao government, and the other went with the Communist Party, Neo Lao Hak Xat which became the Pathet Lao. After Japan occupied Indochina, the group that was loyal to the French became very anti-Japanese and conducted a dramatic rescue of the Lao king, King Sisavang Vong. This successful mission allowed the Hmong to take on important political positions with the French and Communist Party following the war.[11] After the end of World War II, the French attempted to retain control of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) but faced independence movements in all three countries. The French ultimately did not succeed.

Failure to hold elections and ongoing conflict led to the division of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel into a communist North and a United States-supported South. North Vietnam did not like the separation and the U.S. did not want a communist government to take over. If the communists were to take over, U.S. policymakers believed the so-called "domino effect" would cause other nearby countries to fall to communism. In 1961, a coup d'état in the Lao capital weakened political stability. John F. Kennedy, the United States president, stepped in by allowing CIA personnel into Laos. The Hmong people were recruited to help the U.S. military to fight against the Communist presence as part of U.S. containment efforts in the region. The movement of troops and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam led to U.S. bombings of the so-called "Ho Chi Minh Trail" through the Laos highlands, where Hmong people lived.[12]

The war destabilized relations between Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese in the border and highland regions. Following the end of the Vietnam War and the pullout of U.S. forces, North Vietnamese Army began to massacre entire Hmong villages as retaliation for their support of the U.S. The Hmong villagers in Laos had to relocate to escape the brutal massacre. All the Hmong people cared about was keeping their homeland and being able to live in peace. "Many have gone from trying to defeat communism and return to the homeland in Laos, to trying to legitimize themselves and their families as worthy and loyal American citizens (C.Y. Vang, 2010; H. Vang, 2010)."[13]

Kao Kalia Yang does a great job of explaining why it was not good to be Hmong at the beginning of *The Latehomecomer*.

From 1975 into the 2000s, the Hmong became refugees from ongoing conflict and persecution from the "...[c]ommunist regimes that took power in 1975 following the collapse of anti-Communist U.S. foreign policy in the region (Chan1994, 2004)."[14] Many escaped on foot across the Thai border to refugee camps set up by the United Nations. As refugees the Hmong could apply for resettlement to another country of asylum but

the process could take years. The United States offered a refugee resettlement program to relocate Hmong refugees in America. The assurance of keeping them safe and having a place to live was given. However, the discrimination of Hmong people showing up in American cities or rural areas often did not feel like freedom. Sociologist Jeremy Hein mentioned that Americans' often viewed the Hmong and Cambodian people as coming from a lower socioeconomic class than the underclass of America.[15]

*The Latehomecomer* shows how the lives of Hmong often intersected with the inner city's poor and working-class populations after their arrival in the United States. The book also highlights not only the oppression as well as the resistance of the Hmong. While the Chinese Exclusion Act provides useful background knowledge, focusing on the experiences of the Hmong in *The Latehomecomer* provides a closer example of violence and displacement to the Navajo Long Walk in the 1860s that forced the Navajo out of their homelands. The students can compare these different histories of forced migration from their homelands as a history their ancestors endured. The effects of the Exclusion Act of 1882 by U.S. lawmakers extended to other Asian people and lingered in the construction of immigration bureaucracy and procedures. Researchers like Ian Baird, Ph.D and Paul Hillmer, Ph.D., show that Hmong and Lao Americans continue to hope for recognition; others would like to receive burial or other financial benefits. Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer* tells a story about the Hmong people who lived through war and political instability and persecution which shed some light on why immigrants come to places like the U.S. The translation and comparison of today's events on immigration deportation by ICE might make sense.

The memoirs of a Hmong refugee's treatment and family strength form the basis of my curriculum. In the memoir, the family travels to Hong Kong to resettle in America. As the class reads the memoir, students will be told to imagine being cast out of their homeland for political reasons and facing a difficult welcome in America. The memoir prompts the reader to question why humans – especially refugees -- are treated badly. The relocation and the corralling of refugees or immigrants mark the beginning of changes in cultural identity and tradition with an American way of life.

Using *The Latehomecomer*, the book will facilitate discussion of the discourse of people's racism and/or fear of immigrants or refugees coming to America. One must read the memoirs of a Hmong individual to become interested in how and why such devastating events can take place. The book is showing us more the struggle to achieve than having achieved the American Dream of good living and wealth but becoming American comes with its problems of racism. A sense of not belonging to a location or homeland speaks louder than being an American.

### **Culturally Responsive**

Today, the Navajos prefer to be called by their tribal affiliation, Dine. The word Dine is not pronounced with a long I with a silent e. The final letter e with a high mark makes the English phonemic sound of a long vowel sound a, and the i has a short vowel sound. The word Dine is part of the name of the land they occupied, which is called Dinétah. Dinétah, the land where the Navajo resided, was part of southeastern Utah and northwestern New Mexico. Today, the Navajo Land extends into northeastern Arizona, the border of Utah, and northwestern New Mexico. The location of this land lies between the four sacred mountains. These landmarks are considered protectors of the Navajo Nation. It is taught that the Navajo people can reside between these sacred mountains and be home mentally, physically, and spiritually. During negotiations with the U.S. government at Bosque Redondo, Navajo Leaders stated reasons for being returned home to the land between the sacred mountains. These are the mountains our Navajo leaders at Bosque Redondo referred to. Bosque Redondo is the place where the Navajo leaders and their people were imprisoned. This place was a place to

keep the Navajos and the Mescalero Apache people and to control their warrior-like activities among the other Native Indians.[16] Today, elders remind young Navajos of how our ancestors negotiated and were granted to return. So, if a Navajo feels lost, they return home to recollect thoughts, redirect the plan for life, and continue to live in harmony.

From 1863 to 1868, the Navajos were marched to Fort Sumner, New Mexico.[17] The New Mexico Historical Sites says, "Against the political and historical focus mainly in the east, another tragic series of events was unfolding for Native Americans in the western territories of Arizona and New Mexico." Jennifer Denetdale, Associate Professor of History at the University of New Mexico, published a book titled *The Long Walk: The Forced Navajo Exile* that explains in short detail the Navajo timeline of events that forced the movement to Bosque Redondo.

According to the chronology of Dinetdale's book, 1582 is the year that the Navajos first encountered Spaniard Antonio de Espejo in today's northwestern New Mexico. By 1626, Spanish Franciscan friar Zarate Salmeron learned about the Navajos as a tribe. It was between the years of the 1630s and 1860s that the Spanish and Mexican raid the tribe for the slave trade. The women and children were targeted for the slave trade. "In 1659, the governor of New Mexico, Bernardo Lopez de Mendizabal, continued the Spanish practices of self-enrichment at the expense of indigenous peoples by ordering a raid into Navajo country for women and children, many of whom he sold in the Mexican state of Sonora." [18] It is these types of encounters that made Navajo leaders and warriors rebellious toward the U.S. government as well.

By 1846, U.S. Colonel Stephen Kearny claimed Santa Fe, New Mexico, as the territorial capital for the United States. The Navajos and the U.S. government met in Fort Wingate, New Mexico, to make a peace agreement. Two years later, the U.S. government and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the Mexican American War. The fight ended with the U.S. government gaining 1.2 million square miles of territory, which form much of the present-day southwestern U.S., for a total of 15 million dollars. The ownership of the land and the people on the land became the jurisdiction of the U.S. government.[19]

Denetdale's Chronology explains the history which led the Navajo on the march to Fort Sumner. In 1849, the Navajos signed a treaty to accept American rule which meant living with no raids and giving way to accept living like the white settlers. This treaty between the U.S. government was to return Navajo women and children enslaved people back to their families. Many events of the U.S. Army, New Mexican, and Native Tribes complaining of Navajo Raids all came down to hundreds of Navajo people surrendering and obeying the plan to march to Bosque Redondo. By 1860s U.S. westward expansion meant the taking of native lands. The Navajo, like many Native Nations, tried to hold onto their lands but were targeted for removal in much the same way that Southeastern Native American groups had been forced following the 1830 Indian Removal Act. The act laid both the legal and political foundation for the forced relocation of Native Americans.

The Indian Removal Act, implemented in 1830, was enforced, and many Native Indians dealt with their forced relocation in the East and Midwest of America. This order became a tool for General Edward R. S. Canby. By 1864, Canby told James Carleton, New Mexico Department Commander, to carry out the removal of the Navajo. Many Navajo refused to be incarcerated, and the loss of lands for Dine chief Manuelito only made the thought of not marching to Bosque Redondo inevitable. The quote by Peter Iverson says it all: "The proud Dine leader held out as long as he could. No doubt embarrassed by Manuelito's unwillingness to participate in his grand experiment on the Pecos, Carleton eventually ordered his arrest in March 1865...Finally, in September 1866, worn down by all that he and his people had endured, he came to Fort Wingate and from there went on to Hweeldi." [20] Hweeldi is the Navajo name for the place where all captives were sent to live, Bosque

Redondo.

## Life at Fort Sumner

Like that of the Chinese at Angel Island. The comparison of bad living situations at Angel Island and Fort Sumner, New Mexico, will show the feeling of loneliness and the constant problem of having enough basic food to survive were horrible. The idea that America is a beautiful and prosperous place is an umbrella of hope for many immigrants of the past and maybe for current immigrants. Lee and Yung noted at the beginning of their book, *Angel Island Immigrant Gateway to America*, that many dark events have been told about the U.S. Government. "Island is a testament of hardship, perseverance, and ultimate triumphs of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island" – this quote by Lee and Yung --captured my thinking of how it holds for many of the Navajos at Fort Sumner. The fort had housing for the soldiers, stables for horses, corrals for other animals, a parade ground, a hospital, a prison, shops for the carpenter and the blacksmith, a guardhouse, a dining room, and rooms to store food supplies. The place had an office for an Indian agent.[21] A good amount of land was allocated for Navajos. The land was used to distribute food, and land was reserved for planting. The Navajos and other Native Indians had to build their own shelter. It was difficult to accomplish because the land was barren. At Fort Sumner, New Mexico, May 9, 1865, a report was recorded that Lieutenant B. Taylor, Jr., of the Fifth U.S. Infantry, wrote a letter stating that the prisoners were complaining of constipation, headache, and fevers.[22]

The Navajo Treaty 1868 between the United States of America and the Navajo Tribe of Indians expressed concerns about the bad conditions at Fort Sumner. The Navajo needed clothing, blankets, food, meat, and medicine to cure the sick. The supply order was fulfilled, but it came too late for many Navajos. Some Navajo escaped the horrible place. On June 16, 1865, Navajo leaders Ganado Blanco and Barboncito tried to escape, and the Army brought back Ganado Blanco on June 28, 1865.[23] "Barboncito was never caught. Only after Manuelito surrendered, because he had been badly wounded and was without food for his people, was Barboncito also prompted to surrender 18 months later in the vicinity of Ft. Wingate with 21 people on November 7, 1866." [24] This quote shows the determination of Navajo leaders to survive, but the environment and Mother Nature's supplies of fresh food were limited. The water had too much alkalinity, and plants did not grow. According to Denetdale, "Some of the pressing problems that the captives faced as soon as they arrived included the lack of adequate shelter, the constant shortage of food, the harsh climate, and bouts of epidemic diseases, all of which took their toll. In the hopes of changing their living patterns, federal officials expected the captives to live in homes situated close together, much in the manner that the Pueblo peoples lived. Dine...were accustomed to living miles apart from their neighbors." [25] Denetdale's quote helps researchers and readers understand that an accumulation of things made Navajo leaders congregate and begin to negotiate with the U.S. government. On June 1, 1868, the treaty was signed, and the Navajos who survived Boque Redondo left for Dinétah, the homeland of Dine, the Navajos.

The comparison of the Hmong and Navajo living space at the containment areas, the health care at the containment centers, the negotiation of the U.S., and the emotions and spiritual being of being human reveal truly awful conditions. Who can live through such an event and live to talk or write about it? By showing images of the treatment and conditions endured, students will develop respect and empathy for all people seeking to become part of the United States. This will allow discussion of such an event; the responses of these amazing people can help the next generation survive and embrace life.

This type of treatment was held for the Navajo, who endured at Fort Sumner. They had to assimilate to endure such rules and laws by the U.S. government. The legacy of immigration restrictions because of the Chinese

Exclusion Act shaped the treatment of Hmong people in refugee camps. The parallel between the two groups is important to note. The government created the Long Walk to relocate our ancestors to a foreign land, and they suffered similar devastation to the Hmong people. To the U.S. government, the thought of a life to restart at a new Indian reservation seemed obviously good for Navajos and all the people who suffered the Navajo Raids. Of course, the federal removal of the Navajo was for land and the search for settlers to start a new life in the West. The barren land and imprisonment made it impossible for Navajos to live at Fort Sumner. Like the Angel Island Immigration Station off the coast of San Francisco or the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp on the border of Thailand and Laos, Fort Sumner was not a livable place; the food was unfamiliar, and the climate was not suitable for sleeping or making a decent living.

The overall goal of this unit is to open a path to understanding how immigration, forced migration, and deportation occur. Such events are not new and many people of different ethnic backgrounds have suffered to be here in the United States. Despite the difficult history of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese immigrants helped build America. Yet, the fear of too many Asian immigrants has not ended and that fear needs to be understood.

## Teaching Strategies

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The summary of Chapter Two of *Angel Island, An Immigrant Gateway to America*, will begin my focus. The federal government plays an important role in shaping understandings of race. The 1875 Page Act stated that Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian laborers were forbidden from coming to earn a living. The fear of having too many Asian workers is difficult to understand. In my curriculum, my research is to determine why this Act was deemed important. It is the same behavior that the government is taking today to keep immigrants out of the United States. By the end of this unit, students will have created a journal documenting how immigration and separation have fostered true resilience among Asian migrants. In addition, the students will compare and learn about the treatment of their own Navajo ancestors at Fort Sumner. Drawing a map of how immigrants have traveled to America would be a great anchor for understanding the characters in the book, *The Latecomer*. To make the idea real, students will visualize the memoir and document the Hmong people's suffering. Understanding the willingness of refugees and immigrants to make great sacrifices to escape a communist government or violence and persecution helps to show what today's migrants might be going through.

Next, students will build the background knowledge of the Navajo Long Walk. The timeline will show when the Long Walk began, and the day Navajo walked onto the place called Boque Redondo. With each timeline, an important event will be attached as an anchor chart for reading about the Long Walk. Some captions will show how the Navajo accepted rules and regulations; the culture of the Navajos was not accepted, and disregarded. Interestingly, the students will read short captions of the short passages of how Hmong people were treated at the refugee camps such as Ban Vinai and in their new communities after resettlement in America.

To show the discrimination and racism toward the two groups, the teacher will read short excerpts like "Reckoning with Asian America and the New Culture War on Affirmative Action"[26] from an economic standpoint. The article, "The Anxiety of Being Asian American: Hate Crimes and Negative Biases During the COVID-19 Pandemic," by Hannah Tessler, Meera Choi, and Grace Kao will lay out thoughts on how fear can regulate people's thinking of staying away from Chinese people. I found this interesting and connected to the

Navajo Nation being the focal point in 2020. During that year, small towns of the Navajo Nation were overcome with many deaths from Covid-19. Many border towns near the Navajo Nation refused visitors or relatives from Navajo with the virus because it was considered that the Navajos were spreading the virus. Little did communities know that the virus was traveling to many communities and was being transmitted by other people, and not just people from the Navajo reservation. A short article titled "Combating Anti-Asian American/Pacific Islander Racism Through Local Health Departments and Schools of Public Health" by Emma K Tsui and Mary Huynh would be read to examine the discrimination.[27] More readings like "States of Immigration: Making Immigration Policy from Above and Below, 1875-1924" [28] by Robin Dale Jacobson and Daniel Tichenor can clarify the opening chapters of Angel Island, which examines policies and their effects on people held at Angel Island.

Most of the readings mentioned will be used to build background knowledge, and short captions will be put on an anchor chart for learners to refer to. Students' curiosity about today's immigration deportation / ICE will lead to questions and discussion. Today's action on immigration alarmed many people and raised questions about the citizenship of the United States. The full concept of how immigration policy allowed certain people to stay in the U.S. will not be covered, but it will be discussed and labeled as a topic to research later. Covering the basic information about terms is a huge accomplishment because students will know which groups are being targeted for specific reasons. Although the recent deportation is confusing and unjust in people's eyes, the curriculum will be presented in a way that shows how the Hmong people and our Native tribes, like the Navajo tribe, have suffered such a horrible event. By showing similarities between our ancestors' memoirs and their lived experiences, students will learn that the Navajo people survived, and stories can be used to overcome many challenging situations in life.

The research on the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Navajo Long Walk, or any Native citizenship issues, can help our students become empathetic towards people facing deportation.

Through the creation of a timeline and class discussion, students will understand other people's cultures and experiences of becoming strong and persevering to keep their culture alive and well.

## Appendix

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Arizona State standards in Social Studies' disciplinary skills and processes state that chronology requires understanding processes of change and continuity over time, which means assessing similarities and differences between historical periods and between the past and present. Out of the four categories, civics, economics, geography, and history, the unit will focus on history. The history category will develop the idea that civilizations, societies, cultures, and people's innovations have influenced history and continue to impact the modern world. By reading and researching the Hmong and Navajo people, students will develop questions and support them with findings. Students will then gather their own findings and evaluate them through class discussion using a strategy called "Think-pair-share". This type of sharing meets the Arizona state standard in developing claims and communicating conclusions. In the end, the background knowledge anchor charts and the research on people will be concluded with an interactive poster for the entire class to share.

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