



Front Desk: The Exploration of the United Stew of America

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Introduction

The day I left everything I knew and moved to South Korea became the catalyst for an enlightening journey of self-discovery. Before then, I considered only gender and ethnicity to be the major elements of my identity. Life in South Korea, however, forced me to be more cognizant of my nationality as well. While there, my identity quickly became “foreigner,” and I was treated as such, eliciting stares, vaguely offensive questions, and discomfort for simply existing. As time passed, however, I noticed my diet, vocabulary, and mannerisms starting to become influenced by Korean culture. Funnily enough, the addition of those Korean values and traditions to the way I had lived my entire life beforehand gave me the realization that there is a mainstream American culture that I participated in subconsciously. I am aware that this sounds ignorant, but before that time, I believed that culture was defined by unique food, holidays, and traditions. When someone would ask me what traditional American foods were, my mind would go blank. Outside of July 4th, I could not name any national holidays specific to us. Living in a different country, however, allowed me to see that the American culture I thought didn’t exist was actually the amalgamation of the many people and different cultures from around the globe that call the United States of America home.

Because of the fusion of these cultures, people have defined the United States as a “melting pot,” evoking a portrait of ingredients being thrown into a pot and melting together. However, doing this disturbs the core components of the items, erasing what makes them distinct. This metaphor exemplifies assimilation over individuality, becoming coercive in nature by placing pressure on immigrants to shun their native origins.[1] An additional popular metaphor compares the United States to a salad bowl. Improving upon the melting pot theory by exemplifying the uniqueness of each ingredient, the salad bowl metaphor still misses the synergy of different cultures interacting with each other within the country. [2]

While food metaphors will never completely capture the nuances of the reality of our country, I would argue that a stew represents this reality most accurately. A stew relies on different ingredients coming together to create a hearty meal with the parts retaining their own uniqueness while also converging with the other components. As stated by LeAna B. Gloor, “There is a level of compromise between integration and cultural distinctiveness,”[3] when described with a stew. This outlook is the most attached to the multiculturalist approach that the “influences of ethnic groups retaining their distinctive cultural attributes” leads to a brand new cultural identity for a country.[4] The “United Stew of America” metaphor will provide a springboard for

discussions with students that uplift their ethnic identities while reaffirming their belonging in the same breath.

The unit will center around a book study about the novel, *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang. *Front Desk* is about a young Chinese immigrant named Mia, who immigrated from China with her parents in the 1990s. Because of their immigration status, Mia and her parents are struggling financially, and their only means to make money is by managing a motel. During this time, Mia learns how to run the front desk at the motel by herself, while also managing to develop her self-identity, deal with racism, and take care of her family. Through her experiences, my students will learn about the plight of immigrants in the United States, the importance of culture and tradition, and resilience.

In order to deeply engage with the book study, small snippets of the history of the United States immigration system will be shared with the students to develop their empathy for Mia to further understand her point-of-view. Intermingled with the text, students will also read informational texts that connect to the historical context students will be learning about.

Supplementary literary texts will be used alongside these informational texts to allow students to dive deeper into literary elements while also comparing the main characters and their experiences. These literary texts will feature Asian American and Latin American protagonists, to create a bridge to the personal lives of most of my students and create connections between the anchor novel and the informational texts.

To culminate the unit, students will complete a project called “The United Stew of Me.” The first aspect will be an opinion essay on *Front Desk* that requires students to write about the character traits of one of the characters. They will then complete an identity cube with each side serving as a stew ingredient to describe a part of their identity, finishing with an oral presentation to the class. By the end of the unit, my hope is for the students to have a more established sense of self and an appreciation for their role in the “stew” that is the United States.

Rationale

This unit topic is well-suited for my third graders at Cardinal Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia because the vast majority of them are 1.5 and second-generation immigrants from Central and South America. Third grade is a time when students are learning more about who they are in order to position themselves in relation to others and build their own self-confidence. That relationship is being built at home, school, and even in the bigger landscape of the country. Because so many of my students experience differing cultures outside of school, I would like to use this unit to help them develop a multicultural identity. Due to the political climate in the United States right now, I believe it is essential for students to develop their ethnic identity, so that they do not shrink away from their culture but learn to embrace it. Once finished with the unit, they will learn that they are a piece of the multicultural United Stew of America as well.

Front Desk will serve as an accessible text with which to branch into conversations about immigration, identity, and community. Many of my students in previous years have shied away from reading chapter books as they feel they are too difficult or boring to read. This is a chance to introduce them to chapter books in a controlled way that will heighten their interest to read them, while allowing me to teach reading strategies

effectively. Besides that, my other academic objective for the reading of this novel is to increase their reading fluency by introducing a fluency routine to be followed each day. *Front Desk* is also a book rife with material to teach character traits, which is a skill my students struggle with yearly because of lack of vocabulary and real-world application.

Additionally, the combination of the text and understanding of the stew metaphor will help instill skills in the students to absorb and carry with them throughout their lives. Not only will they be learning about how our main character solves problems with the help of others, but they will also learn how Asian Americans worked with their communities to persevere in their fight for justice. The defining of their own identities will allow them to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of their classmates as well.

Foundations of the U.S. Immigration System

To make it possible for students to better understand certain aspects of *Front Desk*, a bit of background knowledge will help tremendously. The students are not expected to know all this information, but certain portions of it may allow them to understand more about Mia's situation. As well, it will humanize the characters in the story and help the students connect it to their own personal stories.

The history of immigration in the United States has been a long and complicated process from its inception to present-day. Heralded as a "nation of immigrants"[5] by former president, John F. Kennedy, one would think that immigrants have always been welcomed graciously, but the opposite occurred. Before 1875, immigration to the United States was mostly relegated to state control and included mostly Western Europeans. However, in the mid to late 1800s, more immigrants from places such as Eastern Europe, China, and Japan made the arduous journey to the United States. The Gold Rush of 1848 became the main event that propelled Chinese people to cross the Pacific to California to escape economic issues and political turmoil in their homeland.[6] At the same time, sugar was becoming a "king crop,"[7] the Transcontinental Railroad was being built, and laborers were needed to secure the stake the government had planted in the American West. To fulfill this need, scores of Chinese immigrants were brought to both western United States and Hawaii to complete this labor and escape that political and economic instability in their home countries. Even though they were necessary to the national economy, they still experienced racism and discrimination related to not being white.

The government intensified this mindset by passing The Page Law in 1875. The Page Law became the first federal law to regulate immigration by excluding Asian laborers brought to the United States without a choice and Asian women who were suspected of entering to perform sex work.[8] This law essentially made a way for the immigration of almost all Chinese women to come to a halt. One can see this as an attempt by the government to flex its sovereign power related to immigration, because less than seven years later, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882. This act allowed the United States to exclude all Chinese laborers for 10 years, with a small subset of exceptions such as merchants, students, and diplomats. Additionally, it explicitly forbade naturalization of any Chinese immigrant.[9] Prior to this, the Rule of Naturalization in 1790 only allowed "free white people" to be recognized as citizens, but the Chinese Exclusion Act was the first to designate an entire group of people as being unwelcome in the country. This act set a precedent for immigrant exclusion, leading to a multitude of similar laws banning successive groups of Asian immigrants.

At the end of the 10-year provision set in the Chinese Exclusion Act, the number of Chinese immigrants had not decreased, signaling to exclusionists that something more needed to be done to rid themselves of those they felt were encroaching on the jobs that were thought to belong to white people.[10] Exclusionists pushed for the passage of the 1892 Geary Act which extended the Chinese Exclusion Act for 10 more years and forced all Chinese laborers living in the United States to register with the federal government, or go to prison and be deported. By the end of 1894, almost every Chinese person residing in the United States had registered.[11] This anti-immigration rhetoric was not only aimed at Chinese immigrants, but also Japanese immigrants, and an anti-Japanese movement was running rampant at the same time. The Gentleman's Agreement, negotiated in 1907-1908, resulted in Japan agreeing to stop issuing passports to Japanese laborers to lessen the amount of Japanese immigration.[12] This agreement, however, still allowed women and children to join their husbands and fathers in the United States.

Another pivotal year for immigration history was 1898 with the *Wong Kim Ark vs United States* U.S Supreme Court case. This case certified birthright citizenship under the 14th Amendment, asserting that anyone born on United States soil was considered an American citizen.[13] Despite this, Asian immigrants were still experiencing hardships, especially upon their arrival to the country. This entry point belonged to San Francisco as the main port for Asian immigrants, where all who disembarked had to undergo mandatory inspections. If the inspection took more than a day, these immigrants were taken to a plethora of different locations with varying levels of conditions. For example, one such location was nicknamed the "detention shed" and was set near the city sewage system with poor ventilation.[14] The government answered complaints about the jury-rigged detention centers with the creation of an immigration station on Angel Island in 1910. People from over 80 different countries passed through Angel Island with a variety of different experiences. Some immigrants, namely those with money or from European countries, were able to undergo a quick process, while Asian immigrants who fell under the exclusion laws faced long detention periods, subpar food, and humiliating medical exams.[15] 35 years after the Page Law was established, the bureaucratic foundation for the United States immigration system was set.

Once exclusionists felt that Chinese and Japanese immigration were adequately addressed, their attention turned to South Asians. There existed a belief that South Asians were the "least assimilable"[16] of Asian immigrants, which led to them having the highest rate of denial on Angel Island, using "likely to become public charges," as the rationale.[17] In 1917, the government passed the Asiatic Barred Zone Act to target them and essentially stop all immigration from Asian countries. The final nail in the immigration coffin was the Johnson Reed Act of 1924, unjustly attributing immigration quotas to specific countries based on native origins with the goal of limiting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, while reaffirming the Asiatic Barred Zone.[18] Immigration restrictionists were finally able to rejoice that they had closed the gates to America to everyone who was not white and posed as bigger hurdles for people from non-Anglo-Saxon groups.

This exclusion period continued for decades until World War II when the United States and China became allies against Japan. This led to the relationship between the two countries mending itself and Chinese people gaining a reputation for being "friends"[19] of the country as a result. The Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act in 1943 further cemented this new alliance, although it did little to reopen Chinese immigration as it established a mere 100 persons per year annual quota. The Cold War and Civil Rights Movement upheld that change of attitude, leading to the repeal of other exclusionary legislation and culminating in a complete overhaul of the Johnson Reed Act in 1965.

We've Made it to America...Now What?

Asian American Response to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act came as a result of an emphasis on foreign policy during the Cold War taking precedence over stateside xenophobia. With the United States being embroiled in numerous foreign conflicts and wanting to further establish itself as a world power, an introspective look at immigration was necessary. Because of the democratic values the United States fought for, the way immigration regulation was handled portrayed those values as hypocritical. In his 1964 State of the Union Address, President Lyndon B. Johnson stated that he wanted the actions of the United States to help make “a world made safe for diversity, in which all men, goods, and ideas can freely move across every border and every boundary.”[20] This sentiment led to the creation of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act.

This act removed national origins quotas, paved the way for family reunification and professional skills-based immigration, and introduced a global cap on immigration that included the Western Hemisphere for the first time.[21] As a result, Asian Americans experienced a large surge in immigration that has continued until present day. In 1975, the end of the Vietnam War led to the migration of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and surrounding areas, increasing the diversity of Asian immigrants.[22] Despite these changing immigration patterns, Chinese people still constitute one of the largest groups of Asian immigrants. According to the 2020 Census, they make up 21.7% of the adult Asian population in the United States.[23]

Political issues, economic opportunities, and desires to reunite with family spearheaded Chinese immigration from 1965 onwards. After 1949, fear grew from the pivot of the Chinese government to communism and made many Chinese people want to escape.[24] The 1965 Immigration Act made it possible for the highly skilled and educated to immigrate for more chances of success in the “land of greater opportunity” as well.[25] Additionally, the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 was authorized by the central government of the People’s Republic of China to suppress pro-democracy protestors by injuring and killing hundreds of them, which continued to spur emigration.[26]

Asian Americans and the Service Industry

Once immigrated, however, numerous challenges arose that immigrants had to contend with in order to survive. Although those highly skilled and well-educated people were now in the country, they still faced extensive discrimination and struggled to find employment. This pushed them to create lives for themselves using the service industry and entrepreneurship as pathways to success. Two examples of industries where Asian Americans have thrived include motels in the present day and laundries in the past.

Indian Americans have a very large presence in the motel industry that is intrinsically tied to their immigrant experiences. Many Indian immigrants entered the states as engineers but found themselves overqualified and underpaid. Those with less education were even more vulnerable as it was common for their jobs to be taken away because of the exportation of job markets to other countries.[27] Instead of staying in this precarious position, these immigrants gravitated towards business ownership because it gave them the “ability to be in control of one’s own destiny.”[28] Being a motel owner as an immigrant was also a complementary arrangement as they felt a front desk agent that spoke English was all they needed to be successful, while the rest of the employees did what was needed to be done in the background.[29]

Chinese Americans experienced a similar path to success in the late 1800s to early 1900s with laundries. With barely any economic opportunities available to them because of discrimination and limited English skills, laundry work was a possible avenue for them to make money to remit to their families in their home country. The minimal amount of English needed to run the laundry was a net positive for the Chinese owners, similar to the Indian owners. These hand laundries were also popular in a time when Chinese people were being unfairly treated by their surrounding communities through their exclusion from labor unions and industrial work. In return, they held cautious attitudes towards the outside world. A physical manifestation of this divide is the unusually tall front counter that was ever present in these businesses that worked as a line of demarcation between an often-antagonistic general public and their personal lives.[30] This can be compared to the front desk in motels.

Model Minority Myth

An additional result of the change in attitude towards Asian Americans in the 1950s was the creation of the model minority stereotype. This stereotype arose during the Cold War as propaganda because Asian Americans were seen as able to attain success in the country through their hard work, Confucian values, and without any external help. They did not complain and upheld the American way of life.[31] Instead of being seen as simply inspirational however, white Americans believed that Asian American success was a result of America being so exceptional that it made that success possible in spite of any past history of racial discrimination. In the present, that myth still exists in that people view Asian Americans as being very well-educated and “smarter” than other racial minorities because of their genetics and upbringing.[32]

The major effects of the model minority myth are the ways in which it hurts the daily lives of Asian Americans. Regarding mental health, research has shown alcoholism and suicide rates of Asian Americans to be higher than their peers of different racial groups. In the documentary, *When You're Smiling*, by Janice Tanaka, Japanese Americans are lamenting “intense conformity-to-whiteness pressures” having driven friends and relatives to suicide.[33] With this stereotype, there is pressure to uphold that image of constantly striving for excellence and success while ignoring any racism and discrimination they experience.[34] Their academic achievements are also usually seen through a lens of foreignness to make other racial groups still feel superior. The model minority myth does not stop other racial stereotypes being deployed against them, such as the belief that Asian people have lower English abilities and general submissive personalities.[35] Mari Matsuda, a legal scholar, has theorized that Asian Americans are serving the purpose of being a “racial middle status between whites and other people of color” with this myth.[36] This rings frighteningly true with the way Asian Americans are constantly compared to Black Americans to make them appear inferior and challenge their political mobilization for social and economic justice.

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

Angel Island

Angel Island was a difficult time for many immigrants that had to suffer through a system created primarily to be against them. Not only were some unfortunate enough to be there for months, but they were also treated as less-than-human with not much hope that they would be released to the mainland. It was a place that could break a spirit. However, the kindness of others and working together helped many of the immigrants forge

ahead. One example of this help was coaching notes. Immigrants on the island went through extremely thorough interrogations with asinine questions such as what the floors in their Chinese home were made of and which direction it faced.[37] If there were any discrepancies with their answers, they could be denied entry and forced to return to their home country. To limit these mistakes, coaching notes were snuck into the facility through unsuspecting items like coins and peanuts. Sample answers were written in Chinese characters on the sides of coins or placed in empty peanut shells and snuck into the facility by either relatives or the kitchen staff.[38] Besides the notes, the Angel Island Liberty Association also helped stabilize the community while inside. It was composed of a group of men in charge of introducing new detainees to the rules and keeping the peace. They even served as mediators between the detainees and the government.[39] The presence of the group helped the community at Angel Island feel more united and reminded them that they were not going through these trials alone.

Chinatowns

Once the immigrants passed through Angel Island, the question of where to settle emerged next. Chinatowns in cities such as San Francisco and New York, were initially formed out of racial segregation, but luckily, were able to serve the needs of newcomers and long time residents. In these areas, Chinese immigrants were able to be near family and friends, speak their native language, and attain a start to employment. This link still exists in the present. “Chinatown remains a gateway for new immigrants and a continuing safe haven for old ones,”[40] Bonnie Tsui states in *American Chinatown: A People’s History of Five Neighborhoods*. When one feels discouraged at the culture shock of living in another country, they have the option to visit a Chinatown to remember themselves.

One of the ways Chinatowns are able to function as an anchor for the Chinese American community is to provide resources to ensure success in the United States. For example, the Joy Lok resource center in the San Francisco Chinatown is a necessary hub for immigrant families. They provide a bridge to American-style culture through children playgroups aimed at modeling age-appropriate activities to help the development of children for parents in the community. Additionally, they make the effort to introduce these immigrants to areas outside of Chinatown to familiarize them with larger society.[41]

These Chinatowns also help continue the connection between Chinese people and their ethnic country, which have been especially important for children. Learning about the history of Chinatowns builds an appreciation in the youth about the community, and that appreciation is key to its survival. There are numerous youth-based initiatives dedicated to maintaining the neighborhood like the Adopt-An-Alleyway program in San Francisco.[42] The founder, Norman Fong, asked high school students what problems they had with the area, and when they answered with the odor of the alleyways, they worked together to take care of the issue. When asked why Fong is so focused on the youth, a younger coworker named Rosa Wong-Chie answered that he wants to “keep Chinatown alive.”[43]

For Chinese people who did not grow up in Chinatown, the community still holds space for them. It becomes a place where they can attend Chinese school, get authentic Chinese food, and become further acquainted with their Chinese heritage. In New York’s Chinatown, a martial-arts and lion-dance school named Southern Praying Mantis Kung Fu exists to introduce people to a traditional style of Chinese dancing. An added benefit of this dance school is that it has given students a place to go to avoid getting involved with gang life and staying in school.[44] Exemplifying the importance of Chinatown being a tie to Chinese culture, one lion-dance group student explains, “I want to experience a little bit of it and retain it in myself, so although I’m an American, I don’t forget that I’m also of Chinese blood.”[45]

Interethnic and Interracial Community Building

In this conversation about community, the importance of community between different groups cannot be forgotten. Mary Paik Lee, a Korean immigrant in the United States, says in her autobiography, “Due to our mutual problems, all minorities felt a sympathetic bond with one other.”[46] For this reason, she made sure to patronize stores owned by Black and Mexican people and vice versa. Activist Grace Lee Boggs also internalized this mindset and worked to fight for civil rights, Black Power, and women’s rights. She fought for the belief that “people of all races and ethnicities [could] live together in harmony”[47] and made a difference with her work. Continuing the efforts of Boggs, a movement by Asian Americans set out to spurn the term “Orientals” and popularize the moniker “Asian Americans” to refer to all Asian ethnic groups.[48] This led to the creation of the Asian American Political Alliance, which platformed interracial solidarity with other groups of color such as African Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans.[49] Together, these groups were able to work together towards their goal of diminishing their oppression.

Importance of a Bicultural Identity

In order for students to understand the United Stew of America metaphor, they must learn and internalize the fact that there are many different types of people that make up the country. Too often do child immigrants feel othered and shy away from how to refer to themselves, but I want them to be confident in that identification. Although the United States is not a monoculture, a mainstream American culture does exist that may be different from what children are experiencing at home. Additionally, I acknowledge that the term, “multicultural,” better describes the lives of many of our students, but bicultural is one way to begin the research about this identity.

There are two major responses to entering a different culture that children can experience. The first is adversarial. The adversarial reaction is centered around a negative mindset about the mainstream culture, so the person rejects all aspects of it. The thought is that if they embrace parts of the culture, they are erasing parts of their native identity as a result. When it comes to children, this usually manifests in poor academic performance at school and behavior issues. They have begun to view doing well in school as “ethnic betrayal” because of negative stereotypes aimed at them.[50] The other reaction is ethnic flight. This is the opposite response where someone aligns themselves fully with the dominant culture at the expense of their own home culture. Academic performance with this type of student usually presents with good results but is unfortunately also seen as a “way to symbolically and psychologically move away from the world of the family and the ethnic group.”[51] While this response may have positive external effects, the person pays with feelings of isolation and self-hatred. They also lose that sense of belonging to their family.

Cultivating a bicultural identity is the most well-adjusted outlook as it is placed on a line between the two previously stated responses. Bicultural identities are described as viewing one’s birth culture as valid, while also understanding that taking steps to participate in mainstream culture does not take away from that culture. In the book, *Children of Immigration* by Carola and Marcelo M. Suárez -Orozco, a teenager by the name of Silvia is interviewed as an example of having a bicultural identity. She has retained a natural curiosity for the “cultural skills she deems necessary to ‘make it’ in the new country,”[52] but still does not shun her Latina heritage. She has done well in high school, holds respect for her parents, and is able to bounce between both cultural worlds easily.

Developing this type of identity is not easy, however. One must take into account the expectations set on them and be careful not to enact a self-fulfilling prophecy similar to the adversarial effect. Suárez-Orozco also posits that a strong community and family can help better prepare the student to handle the adversity they may face throughout their lives. Furthermore, being able to dive into and learn about “one’s own cultural world”[53] requires a natural curiosity that is able to translate to a contrasting world, according to Rutledge M. Dennis. He refers to this person as an “intellectual adventurer”[54] which is what I aim to create with my students. Richmond, Virginia is an extremely diverse area and I hope that by helping students become intellectual adventurers, they will be in a better position to appreciate and accept others who are different from them.

To further reinforce this idea of the United States of America being an amalgamation of different cultures, aspects of the mainstream American way of life and where they came from will also be discussed. For example, traditions of setting off fireworks for celebrations derive from Chinese culture, and barbeques are actually a custom first practiced by Caribbean people.[55] These traditions are also not only picked directly from other cultures and practiced the same way but have melded with American values. An illustration of this is the journey of Chinese food. The Chinese food that we have become accustomed to is very different from Chinese food from China. To be tailored more towards the American palate, it has become “sweeter, boneless, and more heavily deep-fried.”[56] Without people being proud of their cultural identities, everyday elements of mainstream culture would not exist.

Teaching Strategies

Fluency Protocol

To better navigate the reading of *Front Desk*, students will follow a fluency routine that they can expect to use each day that the text is read. Prior to beginning the selection, there will be a class discussion to activate prior knowledge of what happened in the previous section. Then, students will have a reading responsibility assigned to them as I read aloud. For example, whisper reading or drop-in/drop-out with finger tracking. A discussion will follow the selection to address a specific skill or standard related to comprehension. Finally, students will partner-read a few pages to improve their fluency as they now have a basal understanding of what has happened.

Somebody-Wanted-But-So-Then Framework

This framework is a tool to help students summarize what they have read. The ‘Somebody’ is the main character of the selection. The signal words ‘Wanted’ and ‘But’ allow the students to easily identify the conflict. ‘So’ and ‘Then’ will prompt the students to recognize the resolution. These elements will then be used to write a summary of the selection in a complete sentence. These summary sentences are a chance for the students to synthesize what they have read and use writing to check their comprehension.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Each class, one-to-two words will be predetermined to teach before the reading of a selection where those words appear. For the phonetic piece, students will repeat the word twice and count the syllables. The definition of the word will then be explicitly taught with visual aids and synonyms and antonyms, if applicable.

Example sentences with the word used correctly will be used next. Once students are comfortable with the meaning, students will practice applying it in different situations with non-examples to determine if the context is correct. Finally, students will be provided with a sentence frame that requires them to come up with their own sentence using the word to orally share with a partner. This strategy will also help with the teaching of character traits because of the added bonus of context from the story to help solidify the meanings.

Turn-and-Talk

In order for students to have time to form their own thoughts and opinions about the book, turn-and-talks will be used. This strategy begins with the teacher posing a question to the class, and then students turn and talk to their partner to answer the question. Before the process, it is imperative for the teacher to make sure the pairs are established in a way to promote the best communication. Partners must also be monitored during the conversations to ensure that both students have a chance to speak. To ensure participation, it is helpful to have a few students share their answers out loud.

Hands-On Activities

To further deepen instruction, hands-on activities will be utilized to make sure students are engaged and working with the content material in more than one way. When students are able to activate different parts of their brains and bodies, the content is able to permeate deeper. An example of one of these activities will be using physical pieces of paper or manipulatives to model sequencing. Additionally, reader's theater will not only help them internalize the text to bolster comprehension, but also improve their prosody to increase fluency.

Classroom Activities

This unit has an estimated duration of two months with each lesson lasting 45 minutes a day.

Hook and Introduction: Day 1

To begin this unit, the United Stew of America metaphor will be introduced by showing three different videos. Each video will be a representation of the melting pot, salad bowl, and stew theories. This will give students a point of reference for a discussion on which metaphor they think best represents the United States. This will set us up for the overall unit questions of "How did the United States come together as a stew?" and "What does my own stew consist of?"

Within this initial lesson, I will introduce students to the stew theory by speaking on how the United States as a country has been and continues to be influenced by immigrants. It is essential to explicitly teach the definition of immigration. I would be wary of outright asking students to self-identify as immigrants at the beginning as there may be some anxiety about it. Examples will then be provided for how the overall culture of the United States utilizes aspects of different cultures brought by immigrants like setting off fireworks and having barbecues. This will guide us into the idea that the United States as we know it would not be the same without immigration. From there, a brief piece of history will be shared with the students about how the immigration system was actually built to discriminate against Chinese people primarily, and their journey encapsulates how it has progressed. A brief synopsis of *Front Desk* will then be provided to the students

before reading the first two chapters to promote interest.

The first week of the unit will look as follows:

Day 2:

- Introduce vocabulary word (generously)
- Provide historical context by identifying China on a map. Explain reasons for why Chinese people initially came to the United States, and how it eventually led to the Chinese Exclusion Act.
- Read Chapters 3 and 4 of *Front Desk* aloud while students finger track.
- Example post-reading questions: Why did they drink Jasmine tea? Do your families have traditions you follow when good things happen? Using context clues, what do you think a second-class citizen is? How is Mia feeling towards her mom at the end of chapter 4?

Day 3:

- Introduce vocabulary word (complicated, refund)
- Supply background knowledge by briefly showing students pictures of motels and how they are run.
- Introduce character traits and differentiate from character feelings.
- Read Chapters 5 and 6 of *Front Desk* aloud while students finger track. Also, task students with thinking about a possible character trait of Mia in this chapter.
- Give students Stew Recipe graphic organizers to track the character traits they see in the main characters.
- Fill in “determined” character trait for Mia with evidence from the chapter.
- Ask two post-reading questions.

Day 4:

- Introduce vocabulary word (deposit)
- Review summarizing.
- Read Chapter 7 aloud, but have partners read the last two pages together.
- Ask two post-reading questions.
- Complete Somebody-Wanted-But-So-Then framework sentence to write summary sentence of chapter. (Throughout unit, we will increase the number of chapters to write summaries for.)

Day 5:

- Introduce vocabulary phrase (butterflies in my stomach to introduce figurative language)
- Provide historical background by speaking on the types of discrimination faced by Asian immigrants in the past with the Geary Act and the California Alien Land Law.
- Read Chapter 8-9 aloud and have students partner read the last two pages of the chapter.
- Fill out Stew Recipe graphic organizer for Jason with “hostile” as a character trait.
- Wrap up the week of reading with a writing assignment that requires them to write a 3-4 sentence journal entry from Mia’s point of view.

Subsequent Lessons in Weeks 2-7

Throughout the reading of the novel, a fluency protocol will be followed each day with snippets of history sprinkled in to provide background knowledge foundation. Students will also be explicitly taught the academic

skills of identifying character traits and figurative language, summarizing, and sequencing events. Graphic organizers, hands-on activities, and reader's theater will all be used to reinforce these concepts. Biweekly assessments will occur to evaluate how students are progressing towards those academic goals.

In addition to *Front Desk*, the class will read both *Areli is a Dreamer* by Areli Morales and *Nim and the War Effort* by Milly Lee during this unit. Each of these picture books will consist of 2-day lessons to allow time for close reading. An example informational text to be used is a ReadWorks passage called *Building the Railroad* about Chinese immigrants being hired to build the Transcontinental Railroad. These texts will not only provide more background knowledge but also allow students more ways to connect with the unit topic.

Culminating Project

The culminating project for this unit involves three distinct activities that will give students the chance to learn more about themselves and improve their writing and character trait identification skills. The first activity will be an opinion essay where the students will pick a character they found the most interesting and use character traits and text evidence to explain why. Next, they will create a "United Stew of Me" cube using tissue boxes covered with construction paper. These cubes will require students to identify the stew ingredients that make up their identity, pushing them to be more introspective. The final activity will be the students presenting their cubes to the class to emphasize how diverse our classroom is, along with our country.

Children's Bibliography

Lee, Milly. *Nim and the War Effort*. Illustrated by Yangsook Choi. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

This book tells the experience of a Chinese American girl who feels the need to prove her "Americanness" which may be relatable to students.

Morales, Areli. *Areli Is a Dreamer: A True Story by Areli Morales, a DACA Recipient*. Illustrated by Luisa Uribe. Random House Studio, 2021.

This book is captivating in that it tells the true story of a young immigrant's journey to the United States that students can take inspiration from.

Reyes, Gabrielle. "Building the Railroad," *ReadWorks*, July 29, 2026.

This informational text is a good supplemental resource to further discuss why Chinese immigrants came to the United States and their discrimination.

Yang, Kelly. *Front Desk*. Scholastic Press, 2019.

A fantastic own-voices chapter book that is relatable to students and will promote interesting conversation. Something to note is that *Front Desk* briefly appeared on a banned books list in York, Pennsylvania, and was also temporarily banned in Plainedge School District in Long Island. The complaints were centered on the portrayal of police officers and what some consider to be controversial subject matter. I will continue to use

this book in my unit because I believe if students are old enough to experience unfair treatment, they are also old enough to read and learn about it.

Annotated Bibliography

Berray, Mohamed. "A Critical Literary Review of the Melting Pot and Salad Bowl Assimilation and Integration Theories." *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 142-51.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48710211>.

An article about the Melting Pot and Salad Bowl theories with arguments for and against them.

Chou, Rosalind S. and Joe R. Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*. Paradigm Publishers, 2008.

Discussed the negative effects of the model minority stereotype.

Daniel, Alex. "20 'American' Traditions We Totally Stole from Other Cultures" *Best Life*, May 25, 2018.
<https://bestlifeonline.com/fake-american-traditions/>.

Lists multiple things that are common in American culture that have origins in other cultures.

Dennis, Rutledge M. *Biculturalism, Self-Identity and Societal Development*. Emerald Group Publishing, 2008.

Defined biculturalism and demonstrated examples.

Dhingra, Pawan. *Life Behind the Lobby: Indian American Motel Owners and the American Dream*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

Detailed history of the journey taken by Indian Americans as hoteliers.

Hernández, Kelly Lytle. *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Description of how the Geary Act came to be and its effects.

Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America: A History*. Simon and Schuster, 2015. Accessed July 9, 2026.
ProQuest Ebook Central.

A more recent recounting of Asian American history which was used mostly for post-1965 historical information.

Lee, Erika and Judy Yung. *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

This text provided great background knowledge on the creation and innerworkings of Angel Island.

Louie, Andrea. "Counter Cultures: The Place and Space of the Chinese Laundry." In *Chinese American Mothering: Toy Len Goon's Legacy and the Myth of the Model Minority*. NYU Press, 2025.

This chapter gives information about the intersection between Chinese laundries and Chinese American culture.

Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, E-book, Princeton University Press, 2004.

Gave a very in-depth breakdown of the Johnson Reed Act.

Paik Lee, Mary. *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*. University of Washington Press, 1990.

First-hand recollection by a Korean immigrant who immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s.

Qin, Amy. "This Man Won Birthright Citizenship for All," *New York Times*, February 10, 2025.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/10/us/birthright-citizenship-wong-kim-ark-supreme-court.html>.

Brief overview of the Wong Kim Ark v. United States Supreme Court case.

Rude, Emelyn. "A Very Brief History of Chinese Food in America," *Time*, February 8, 2016.
<https://time.com/4211871/chinese-food-history/>.

Describes the transformation of Chinese food in the United States.

Suárez-Orozco, Carola and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco. *Children of Immigration*. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001.

An enlightening study into the effects of immigration on children.

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Little, Brown, and Company, 1989.

This book gives a detailed history of Asian American history, but as it was released in 1989, post-1965 events were not as thoroughly explored.

Tsui, Bonnie. *American Chinatown: A People's History of Five Neighborhoods*. Free Press, 2009.

A very intriguing book about different Chinatowns in the United States that discusses their creation and transformations, while also including personable interviews.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

By the end of this unit, students will have fulfilled the following Virginia Standards of Learning for third graders.

Through reading *Front Desk* and supplementary texts, students will improve their reading fluency to attend to these standards.

- DSR.A. Read a variety of grade-level complex texts with accuracy, automaticity, appropriate rate, and

meaningful expression in successive readings to support comprehension. Monitor while reading to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, as necessary

- DSR.C. When responding to texts through discussions and/or writing, draw several pieces of evidence from read alouds and grade-level complex texts to support claims, conclusions, and inferences, including quoting or paraphrasing from texts accurately and tracing where relevant evidence is located
- DSR.D. Regularly engage in listening to a series of conceptually related texts organized around topics of study to build knowledge and vocabulary. Use background knowledge as context for new learning

The daily vocabulary acquisition routine will help increase orthographic mapping and build higher-level word knowledge to meet these standards.

- RV.1A. Develop general academic language and content specific vocabulary by listening to, reading, and discussing a variety of texts relevant to a grade three topic or subject area.
- RV.1B. Discuss meanings of complex words and phrases acquired through conversations and literature.
- RV.1F. Develop breadth of vocabulary knowledge by listening to and reading high quality, complex text.

Explicitly targeting the following skills will bolster student comprehension.

- RL.1B. Identify the central conflict and resolution using events from the plot to summarize the text.
- RL.1C. Describe a character's attributes, including their traits, motivations, or feelings and how they develop throughout the text.
- RL.2B. Identify and explain how an author uses sensory language (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, and tastes) to impact a reader's understanding of characters, settings, and plot events.
- RL.3B. Compare and contrast details in paired literary and informational nonfiction texts including their treatment of similar themes, topics, and patterns of events.

Notes

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[2] LeAna B. Gloor, "From the Melting Pot to the Tossed Salad Metaphor: Why Coercive Assimilation Lacks the Flavors Americans Crave," *Hohonu: A Journal of Academic Writing* 4 (2006): 29. <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/campuscenter/hohonu/volumes/documents/Vol04x06FromtheMeltingPot.pdf>

[3] Gloor, "From the Melting Pot," 30.

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- [8] Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.
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- [10] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 67.
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- [13] Amy Qin, "This Man Won Birthright Citizenship for All," *New York Times*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/10/us/birthright-citizenship-wong-kim-ark-supreme-court.html>.
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- [15] Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 76-81.
- [16] Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 149.
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- [21] Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 260-262.
- [22] Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 285.
- [23] "Detailed Races and Ethnicities in the United States and Puerto Rico: 2020 Census," United States Census Bureau, accessed July 28, 2026, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/detailed-race-ethnicities-2020-census.html>.
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- [35] Chou and Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority*, 9.
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