

Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion Pre-Visit or Introductory Activity

The Golden Door

For many students, the story of Chinese immigration to the United States will be unfamiliar, and the details about the six decades of legal Chinese Exclusion may shock them. This activity is designed to give them a starting point. It contrasts the story of the Statue of Liberty, particularly the fundraising campaign to finance the pedestal, with documents from the same period that address what was known as the Chinese Question.

The exhibition and the curriculum both begin in the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution and work forward chronologically. This activity is set in the 1880s, just before and just after the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. It is meant to locate students in a moment of high drama and conflicting principles. The goal is to help them raise their own compelling questions about how and why Exclusion became the law of the land, questions that will focus their visit to the exhibition or their exploration of the curriculum, especially Unit 1.

The following five resources are included with this activity. Please note that Resource C is introduced in thematic, not chronological, order.

- Resource A is the well-known 1883 Emma Lazarus poem, “The New Colossus,” now inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, but originally written as part of the fundraising campaign for the statue’s pedestal. (The statue itself, from torch to toes, was a gift of the French people. Private U.S. donors were expected to pay for the pedestal.)
- Resource B is an 1884 Thomas Nast cartoon urging contributions to the pedestal fund.
- Resource C is an 1881 political cartoon from San Francisco’s *The Wasp*, entitled “A Statue for *Our* Harbor.” The cartoonist has adapted the Statue of Liberty image to portray Chinese immigration in harshly negative light.
- Resource D is an excerpt of a letter, printed in a New York newspaper in 1885, from a Chinese student named Saum Song Bo. He angrily notes the irony of being asked for a contribution to the Statue of Liberty pedestal when Chinese people were not welcomed in the United States.
- Resource E is a brief timeline of the fundraising effort and construction of the Statue of Liberty. It can be introduced at any point you wish, based on how much background information your students will want or need.

Activities

In a classroom discussion, ask students what they know about the Statue of Liberty. If necessary, prompt them to consider its size, location, and its importance as an American symbol.

Break the class into small groups to study the provided resources. Throughout these activities, ask each group to keep a running list of any questions that occur to them—questions that the documents raise but do not answer. As they look at the resources in succession, they should cross off any questions that the new resource answers.

In small groups, introduce Resource A, the famous Emma Lazarus sonnet that ends with “Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses . . .” Ask students to find any language that helps them understand whom the poem was welcoming to America. They will find many terms in the last five lines especially, but they should also notice “Mother of Exiles,” and “world-wide welcome.” (You may want to explain that the “twin cities” in line 8 refers to New York and Brooklyn, which were then separate cities.) In the poem’s language, were any groups or classes unwelcome?

Now introduce Resource B, the Thomas Nast drawing in support of the pedestal fund. Ask students to read it closely and respond to the following:

- Describe the foreground and background.
- Based on the text provided by Nast, what is the purpose of this drawing?
- Who is the intended audience?

By this point, students should be aware of both the idealistic symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, and of the fundraising campaign for the pedestal. The next step is to introduce Resources C and D, which explore the Chinese Question from opposite perspectives.

Resource C, a political cartoon entitled “A Statue for *Our* Harbor,” links directly to Resource B, but with very different meaning. Explain that it was published in an anti-Chinese San Francisco newspaper called *The Wasp*, in 1881, when the actual Statue of Liberty was being constructed in France. Ask students to read it closely and respond to the following:

- Describe the foreground and background, and the text used in the cartoon.
- Describe the “statue” figure in detail. How is it different from the statue in Resource B—gender, race, appearance, etc.?
- What is the purpose of this drawing? Who is the intended audience?

Now introduce Resource D, the excerpt of Saum Song Bo’s letter to *The New York Sun*. Saum was a student in New York City, fluent in English, who attended Christian services at the

Chinese Sunday School Union. Ask students to read the excerpt closely and respond to the following:

- Why did Saum write this letter to the newspaper?
- What contradictions is he writing about? How does he feel about them?
- How does he interpret the meaning of Liberty?

The Statue of Liberty story is focused on Europeans arriving in New York. The anti-Chinese movement was centered in California, where the great majority of Chinese immigrants arrived. To address this specifically, ask students to contrast Resources A and B, as a pair, with Resources C and D. What do these documents suggest about the different experiences of European and Chinese immigrants at this period of American history?

As a class, share these unanswered questions and pare down any redundancies. The goal is to end this exercise with a few compelling questions about how Chinese Exclusion became U.S. law, and why. Ask students to work to answer as many questions as they can when they visit the exhibition or begin work on the curriculum.

Resource A

Emma Lazarus poem, “The New Colossus” 1883

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Resource B
“The Bartholdi Statue”
Harper’s Weekly, December 6, 1884



Thomas Nast, “The Bartholdi Statue,” *Harper’s Weekly*, December 6, 1884. New-York Historical Society.

Resource C
“A Statue for *Our Harbor*”
The Wasp, November 11, 1881



George Frederick Keller, “A Statue for *Our Harbor*,” *The Wasp*, November 11, 1881. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Resource D
Letter from Saum Song Bo
The New York Sun, June 30, 1885

Sir:

A paper was presented to me yesterday for inspection, and I found it to be specially drawn up for subscription among my countrymen toward the Pedestal Fund of the Bartholdi Statue of Liberty. Seeing that the heading is an appeal to American citizens, to their love of country and liberty, I feel that my countrymen and myself are honored in being thus appealed to as citizens in the cause of liberty. But the word liberty makes me think of the fact that this country is the land of liberty for men of all nations except the Chinese. I consider it an insult to us Chinese to call on us to contribute toward building in this land a pedestal for a statue of Liberty. That statue represents Liberty holding a torch which lights the passage of those of all nations who come into this country. But are the Chinese allowed to come? As for the Chinese who are here, are they allowed to enjoy liberty as men of all other nationalities enjoy it? Are they allowed to go about everywhere free from the insults, abuse, assaults, wrongs and injuries from which men of other nationalities are free? . . .

By the law of this nation . . . , a Chinaman, cannot become a citizen. . . . Whether this statute against the Chinese or the statue to Liberty will be the more lasting monument to tell future ages of the liberty and greatness of this country, will be known only to future generations. Liberty, we Chinese do love and adore thee; but let not those who deny thee to us, make of thee a graven image and invite us to bow down to it.

Resource E

The Statue of Liberty: Timeline

1865: A monumental statue for New York Harbor is first proposed by Edouard Laboulaye, a French abolitionist, scholar of the U.S. Constitution, and supporter of Abraham Lincoln. He is eager to celebrate both the upcoming American centennial and the recent abolition of slavery following the Civil War. He calls the planned monument “Liberty Enlightening the World.”

1875: After a decade of private fundraising, work on the statue begins in Paris, with sculptor Auguste Bartholdi as designer. The French people—not the government—provide the \$250,000 cost of constructing the statue. The U.S. is expected to privately fund and build the pedestal on Bedloe’s Island, where the statue will stand.

1880: The United States is home to nearly 4 million people from Ireland and Germany, the country’s two largest immigrant groups. Most arrived at New York City, the major point of entry for most European immigrants. Only about 100,000 U.S. immigrants are French. Roughly the same number are Asian, but most of these crossed the Pacific Ocean and entered at San Francisco or other West Coast ports.

1883: Joseph Pulitzer, a Hungarian immigrant and owner of *The World*, a New York City newspaper, becomes active in the fundraising for the pedestal. As part of the effort, Emma Lazarus writes a poem called “The New Colossus.” A copy is sold for \$1,500. The final lines of the famous poem—“Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”—were not inscribed on the statue until 1903. The complete poem was added, over the main doorway, in 1945.

1884: Work on the pedestal begins on Bedloe’s Island, in New York Harbor. Construction stops when funds run out.

1885: The finished statue is shipped to the United States in sections. The 214 crates are stored until money can be raised to complete the pedestal. Pulitzer, frustrated because wealthy people did not provide all the needed funding, begins a vigorous campaign to encourage small contributions from the working men and women of America, many of them recent immigrants. He prints circulars, sells souvenirs for \$1 each, and offers to publish every donor’s name in *The World*. The campaign is a success, and construction of the pedestal resumes.

1886: Workers begin assembling the statue on the completed pedestal. On October 28, the monument is formally dedicated. It faces southeast, toward the entrance to New York Harbor. Visible for miles, the raised right arm alone is 42 feet tall, about the height of a four-story building. (For other statistics, see <http://www.nps.gov/stli/historyculture/statue-statistics.htm>.)