

ACTIVITY

Staging the Compelling Question

Overview

About This Activity

Students define the term “borders” and think about borders that exist in their own lives. They also review the history and significance of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the era of Chinese exclusion.

Compelling Question

How did the Angel Island Immigration Station both reflect and enforce borders within American society?

Procedure

Activity 1: Introduce the Inquiry's Themes

Open by explaining to students that over the course of this historical inquiry, they will be exploring the concept of borders as social, economic, and political boundaries, as well as geographic ones. Create a [Gallery Walk](#) or slideshow presentation using the images from the handout **Gallery Walk Images: Angel Island Immigration Station**.

As students view the images, ask them to record answers to the following questions in their journals for each image:

- How would you describe the border represented by this image? What do you think is on either side of the border?
- What is necessary to keep the border in place?
- What messages does the border send to those on either side?

Activity 2: Create a Class Definition for the Word “Border”

Debrief students’ answers as a class. Then create a class definition for the word *border*, and post it on the wall or the board so that students can refer to it throughout the inquiry. Note that the definition should be an expansive one that moves beyond a definition of the word as strictly geopolitical.

Activity 3: Introduce the Chinese Exclusion Act

Explain to students that over the course of this inquiry, they will be exploring borders—geographic, social, and political—that have existed historically and continue to exist in American society. More specifically, they will be learning about the role that the Angel Island Immigration Station played in creating and enforcing borders between 1910 and 1940, and the role that Chinese immigrants played in challenging these borders. Then introduce students to a piece of historical context that is central to the inquiry as a whole: the Chinese Exclusion Act. Show this clip from the PBS documentary *The Chinese Exclusion Act* (0:00-11:30). Ask students to take notes on the clip that will help them answer the following questions:

- What were the key parts of the Chinese Exclusion Act?
- Who was targeted by the law and in what way?
- How long did the Chinese Exclusion Act last?
- Why do many historians consider the Chinese Exclusion Act to be a turning point in US history?

Debrief the questions as a class.

Activity 4: Respond to Journal Prompts

Finally, ask students to respond to the following journal prompts. Reveal the questions one by one to give students time to respond to each prompt.

Sociologist Kai Erikson has noted that one of the surest ways to “confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is not.”

- In your own words, summarize Erikson’s idea.
- Have you ever defined yourself according to this logic? When might it be useful to do so? When is it harmful?
- How does this quote relate to the history of Chinese exclusion?
- How does it relate to the concept of borders that you’ve explored in class today?