



TITLE

THE PAGE ACT (1875): WHAT IS IT? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

GRADE LEVEL: UPPER ELEMENTARY TO HIGH SCHOOL

SUBJECT: Social Studies, History, Arts, English

THEME: Bias and Stereotype, Civil Rights, Identity and Culture, Immigration, International Affairs, and Labor

STANDARDS: UCLA United States History Content Standards: Era 6: The Development of the Industrial U.S. (1870-1900). Standard 2: Massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts,

OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to:

- Explain what the Page Act (1875) did and give reasons for its passage.
- Show how the Page Act set the stage for the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.
- Describe ways in which the Page Act affected the lives of Chinese here already and contributed to stereotypes about Asian women that have been perpetuated to the present day.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- Why would the United States want to deny Chinese women the opportunity to come to the U.S.?
- What were the consequences of the Page Act both in practical terms and in what it meant for how Chinese and Asian women were viewed?

CLASSROOM TIME:

1 to 2 Periods

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CONTEXT:

The Page Act is little-known and rarely taught. By 1875, anti-Chinese feeling had been fueled by white workers on the west coast who feared the Chinese were taking their jobs. The issue of excluding Chinese laborers by legislation was complicated by treaty considerations (see Burlingame Treaty in Resources), so some legislators sought to do so incrementally. If Chinese women, so few in number already, could be portrayed as coming to America for “lewd and immoral purposes,” it would further the goal of limiting Chinese coming to the U.S. The Page Act, by linking laborers from “China, Japan, and any other Oriental country,” to language specifically prohibiting “the importation of women for the purposes of prostitution,” took a huge step towards exclusion. The subsequent passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) also does not get the full attention it should, but because it took the extraordinary step of barring a specific nationality from entering the U.S. and denying them citizenship, the Page Act slipped into the shadows. Yet, the Page Act established the precedent for all future exclusionary and discriminatory immigration laws. It also says a lot about attitudes towards Chinese women at the time, and it is important because it shaped future policy and further fed sexualized stereotypes about Asian women that persist to the present.

ACTIVITIES:

Hook: Photo of Chinese family in America, circa 1911

National Archives Catalog: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5585730>

Show the class this photo which is also available in the accompanying slideshow:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1R63s315iG7clqf6yP1576w5rcjyr6DRBrR-O4ubB-Ac/edit>



Using the See, Think, Wonder activity sheet (https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/See%20Think%20Wonder_2.pdf), have students make sense of the photograph: See, Think, Wonder Follow suggestions from the guide for generating student comments, reactions, and expressions. Students should address elements of family (Using the See, Think, Wonder activity sheet (access below), have students make sense of the photograph: See, Think, Wonder Follow suggestions from the guide for generating student comments, reactions, and expressions. Students should address elements of family (father, mother, children), clothing (western-style dress), social level (solid, “middle class”). Questions in the “think” and “wonder” areas might arise around how the family achieved success, why did they adopt American customs, did they face discrimination for being Chinese/Asian? (Depending on grade level, some students may have prior knowledge of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) or other history of prejudice against Asians. See Resources for additional background as needed.), mother, children), clothing (western-style dress), social level (solid, “middle class”). Questions in the “think” and “wonder” areas might arise around how the family achieved success, why did they adopt American customs, did they face discrimination for being Chinese/Asian? (Depending on grade level, some students may have prior knowledge of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) or other history of prejudice against Asians. See Resources for additional background as needed.)

Referring back to the photo, ask students to imagine life for the man if the mother and children are removed from the photo, if he had to live without them. You may get puzzled looks and faces that ask, “What do you mean?” That’s ok. Tell them that the lesson will explore a time when the U.S. had a policy to exclude Asian women and, then, all Chinese from entering the U.S. and keep them from becoming citizens.

Show students this quote: “In the early 1870s, there were roughly 78 Chinese women per 1,000 Chinese men in the U.S. ...After the [Page Act’s] passage, that number dropped to 48 women per 1,000 men.” Prof. Ian Shin, U. of Michigan.

ACTIVITIES:

<https://www.history.com/news/chinese-immigration-page-act-women>

Have students gain more background and context from the link above as to how Chinese men usually came alone to the U.S. and the kinds of work they did. Ask students to consider what the effects and implications are for having families and preserving culture given those numbers.

Have students do a close reading of the sections from History.com above that speak directly to the Page Act and the Impact of the Page Act. Add responses to those students have already made that deal with the information related to how Chinese women were viewed in the Act and the problems it presented for establishing family roots in America. Consider, too, the laws related to miscegenation (marriage laws that forbade mixing of whites with other races). (Note to teachers: you may add that from the Chinese Imperial government’s perspective [Qing dynasty], leaving China was considered a betrayal and if one returned could be punished by death.) For men, a further complicating factor was that for those intending to return to China at some point, continuing to wear one’s hair long in the form of a single long braid, the queue, was a necessity. The queue was a symbol of submission to the Emperor, and cutting it off could mean punishment by death if one returned to China without it. But the queue in America suggested disloyalty to America and an unwillingness to assimilate.

http://teachingresources.atlas.illinois.edu/chinese_exp/introduction04.html

Have students read the statement issued by the Chinese Historical Society of America in response to the killings of eight people, six of them Asian women, in Atlanta in February of 2021. How does the statement link the Page Act and other events in American history to the killings?



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ASSESSMENT/REFLECTION:

Have students reflect on the image of Asian women over time. Give particular consideration to representations seen on TV and film.

As an extension activity, the resource below from the National Archives DocsTeach program can be explored to give a more detailed personal story about challenges families faced in order to make it possible to be accepted into America.

“Declaration of Non-Immigrant Alien About to Depart the U.S.” Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/declaration-of-nonimmigrant-alien-about-to-depart-for-the-united-states>

Below is an extended excerpt from the National Archives DocsTeach site. It is the story of historian Erika Lee’s grandmother:

Chinese women immigrants faced not only racial prejudice but also false assumptions about their gender roles. The first anti-Chinese legislation enacted into American law—the 1875 Page Act—aimed not only to prevent Chinese contract workers but also Chinese prostitutes from entering the United States. The law reflected a popular prejudice, lasting well into the 20th century, that most Chinese women were brought to America for prostitution. When 27-year-old Wong Lan Fong and her new husband, Yee Shew Ning, traveled to the United States, they were aware of such prejudices and took measures to emphasize their respectability and economic status. They delayed their departure for the United States until they had enough money to travel in first class. They also submitted a letter from the clergyman who performed their wedding ceremony, attesting to their good character. Immigration officials seized further evidence when they confiscated the couple’s wedding photograph as proof of their marriage. The couple’s strategy worked. They were detained on Angel Island only one day before being allowed to land. Some 70 years later, their granddaughter, American historian Erika Lee, was conducting research for her book on Chinese immigration at the National Archives in San Bruno, California, when she discovered her grandparents’ wedding photograph in her grandmother’s immigration file.

SOURCES:

Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, See, Think, Wonder
https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/See%20Think%20Wonder_2.pdf

Chris Carlson, Shaping San Francisco’s Digital Archive, “The Workingmen’s Party and the Agitation of Denis Kearney,” 1995.
https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Workingmen’s_Party_%26_The_Denis_Kearney_Agitation

Jessica Pierce Rotondi. History.com
<https://www.history.com/news/chinese-immigration-page-act-women>

Immigration History, Burlingame Treaty
<https://immigrationhistory.org/burlingame-treaty-of-1868/>

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SOURCES:

Deenesh Sohoni. "Unsuitable Suitors: Anti-Miscegenation Laws, Naturalization Laws, and the Construction of Asian Identities." *Law & Society Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 587-618.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4623396>.

Text of the Page Act, March 3, 1875
<https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1875Immigration%20Act.pdf>

Reproductive Health Access Project
Women's History Month: Spotlight on the 1875 Page Act - Reproductive Health Access Project

Rosalie Chan, Teen Vogue, May 18, 2018
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/the-chinese-exclusion-act-explained>

Chinese Historical Society of America
<https://chsa.org/2021/03/responding-to-the-atlanta-shootings/>

Lee, Catherine. "'Where the Danger Lies': Race, Gender, and Chinese and Japanese Exclusion in the United States, 1870-1924." *Sociological Forum* 25, no. 2 (2010): 248-71.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40783393>.

Westlaw Today
[https://today.westlaw.com/Document/I9171b84291f711ebbea4f0dc9fb69570/View/FullText.html?transitionType=Default&contextData=\(sc.Default\)&firstPage=true](https://today.westlaw.com/Document/I9171b84291f711ebbea4f0dc9fb69570/View/FullText.html?transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default)&firstPage=true)

Shawna Chen, Axios, March 16, 2022
<https://www.axios.com/2022/03/17/asians-atlanta-shootings-anniversary>

Kimmy Yam, NBC News, March 17, 2021
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/racism-sexism-must-be-considered-atlanta-case-involving-killing-six-n1261347>

University of Illinois, The Chinese Experience in 19th c. America
http://teachingresources.atlas.illinois.edu/chinese_exp/introduction04.html



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