

Name:

US History II

Date

Case Study: Li Keng's Journey to America

This is the story of a Chinese American woman, Li Keng, and her family's journey to America. Although they immigrated in the 1930s, their experiences were very similar to other Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Read her story and answer the questions as you read.

Chapter 1: Life in China

My father came to the United States in 1912 to search for a better life. There were no jobs in our small village of Goon Do Hung in southern China. My father needed money to take care of his new family and his widowed mother. When he first arrived in the United States, he did any kind of job he could get. After a while, he became an apprentice in a friend's herbal store.



*Family portrait in 1944. Li Keng is second from left.
(Photo courtesy of Li Keng Wong)*

He sent money home several times a year, and once in a while, he came for a short visit. After one of these visits, I was born in 1926. When I was young, I lived with my mother, older sister Li Hong, and younger sister Lai Wah.

As a child, I was a tomboy. I climbed trees, explored the forest behind the village, played hide-and-go-seek, hunted for bamboo shoots, and waded in the lake in front of village. Life was peaceful in our sleepy village. Villagers got along well and helped one another during the rice harvest twice a year.

Father came home once or twice that I could remember. He could never stay long because he had to go back to the United States to work. He never mentioned that someday that he wanted to take us to the United States, but he was thinking about it.

On his last visit home, he was sad at how poor the villagers were. They made a living by planting rice crops. People were so poor that no one had milk to drink or had much meat to eat. Almost no one had ever learned to read or write. So my father decided that his family must immigrate to the United States to have a better life.

When we decided to leave, it was 1933. I was only seven years old.

1. What conditions in China motivated Li Keng's family to leave?

2. Do you think you would have made the same choice if you were living there? Why/why not?

Chapter 2: Preparing to Leave

First, Father sent us a letter from America with some coaching papers. He explained to us that our mother couldn't enter the United States as his wife because there were laws that forbade a laborer to bring in a wife. The only Chinese men who were allowed to bring in wives were diplomats, students who were studying in the United States, and merchants. However, our mother could enter as his sister. He told us to call our mother "Auntie."

Once we got our father's letter, we used the coaching papers to study, and we had to memorize the answers to the questions. The authorities in the United States asked lots of questions before they allowed any Chinese in. Some of questions they asked:

- When and where were you born?
- What is your occupation?
- Can you read any language?
- What is your final destination in the United States?
- Who is that lady with you? Is she your mother?

Mother, Li Hong, and I went over the questions and memorized the answers. Lai Wah was too young to do what we did. We practiced calling our mother "Auntie" many times. My father came back to the village to travel with us to America, and he helped us prepare our answers. Father kept saying, "You must never make a slip by calling your mother 'Mother.' If you make a mistake, the authorities will deport us back to China in shame." We nodded our heads when Father spoke to us. We didn't want to jeopardize our chance of entering the United States.

3. Why do you think that American laws forbid Chinese immigrant laborers from moving to America with their wives? (What were they worried would happen?)

Chapter 3: Leaving Home

We were happy about our father's decision to bring us to America, but at the same time felt sad to leave our friends and neighbors.

Mother made preparations for us to leave. She gave away all our furniture, clothes, and utensils to our neighbors. We gave our small plot of land to a close relative, and our next-door neighbor

lived in our house. We even had a water buffalo that was given to a very poor family in the village. All the villagers thanked us for our generosity and wished us good luck in the new world.

In 1933, only a few Chinese were allowed in. Because of the Chinese Exclusion act, only 4,928 Chinese were allowed to immigrate between 1931 and 1940 — compared with 339,570 immigrants from the United Kingdom. Our father was very lucky to obtain four spots in the quota for us. He never explained to us how he did it. It was a miracle!

Getting to the new world was not going to be easy. Even though we had four slots to enter the United States, we still had to get there! We traveled by foot, by boat, and by train just to get to Hong Kong!

4. How do you think it felt for Li's family to give away most of the stuff they owned?

Chapter 4: Hong Kong

Hong Kong was an exciting city where we encountered many different ethnic groups and crowded streets. It was a busy and noisy city. We stayed in Hong Kong for two days and one night. It was the first time I had ever stayed in a hotel.

The hotel itself was like a palace. We were delighted with the bathrooms with running water, flush toilets, and electric lights. We didn't have anything like that in our village, and I had never even seen a flush toilet before!

It was also the first time we heard English spoken, and we all wished that we could speak it too. Father understood the spoken English and he translated for us. We knew that we would have to learn English when we arrived in America so we paid a lot of attention to this new language.

We toured Hong Kong and loved Victoria Peak. Standing on Victoria Peak was almost like looking down from heaven.

Father took us shopping for American outfits. We looked so different because of the American-style clothes, and we felt the clothing made us look like rich people.

After two days, we boarded a steamship called U.S.S. *Hoover*. The steamship was huge — as big as the lake in front of our village!



Asian immigrants on the deck of boat that is carrying them to Angel Island. (Photo © California State Museum Resource Center)

5. Why do you think Li Keng hadn't ever heard English before?

Chapter 5: Arriving at Angel Island

We sailed for 19 days across the Pacific Ocean until we landed in San Francisco. We had to get off of the U.S.S. *Hoover* and were transferred to a small **tender**, a ferry, to go to Angel Island.

Angel Island is located in the middle of San Francisco Bay. Many immigrants from the Far East were processed at the Angel Island stop.

It is estimated that 175,000 Chinese immigrants came through Angel Island. Immigrants from Korea, the Philippines, and Japan also came through Angel Island, though they were usually not detained as long as Chinese. Many Chinese were detained in Angel Island anywhere from two weeks to several months because of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. A few people were detained up to two years!



Japanese war brides arriving at the Angel Island docks. (Photo © California State Museum Resource Center)

Some detainees carved Chinese poems on the walls to lament their fate. They were bored, lonely, sad, and isolated in the barracks. By patiently carving poems on the wooden walls, they helped to pass the slow ticking time and to express their frustrations.

My mother, sisters, and I were the only new arrivals that night in late November of 1933. Since our father had already immigrated to the U.S., he did not need to go to Angel Island. He would wait for us in San Francisco.

6. Why didn't Li Keng's dad have to wait at Angel Island?
7. Why do you think immigrants from Asian countries went to Angel Island rather than Ellis Island?

Chapter 6: Detained on Angel Island

We arrived in high hopes but we worried about not being able to answer the many questions that the authorities were to ask us. We were scared of getting deported.

A number of Chinese people were deported back to China. For us, returning to China would be shameful. There were rumors that a few people committed suicide rather than to be sent back to China in shame.



Women and men were segregated in Angel Island, and while we were there, we were locked up in the women's barracks. The barracks had barred doors and windows. Guards wearing green uniforms stood outside and constantly watched us. Our barrack had a handful of women who came before us and were still waiting to learn their fate — would they make it into the United States or return home in shame?

Each day, we sat and waited to be called for our immigration interview. The waiting was nerve-racking. There wasn't anything to keep us occupied. We had no books to read and no toys to play with. We didn't study the coaching papers while being detained because we had memorized the questions and answers back in our village.

Each day, we were escorted to the dining area, where we ate Chinese food. We ate rice, meat, and vegetables. We also ate bread and fruit. The food was good and was supplemented by the government.

But we were not treated kindly. The officials seldom smiled or acknowledged us. I hated the detention and I was worried that we could be deported, but I did not have to worry for long.

After a week, we had our immigration interview. We were interrogated separately. Mother was questioned for one day, my older sister Li Hong was questioned for half a day, and I was questioned for two hours. My father had to make the trip from Oakland, taking the ferry to Angel Island, where he was questioned for two days. We didn't even know he was there until later because we had no way to communicate with him!

Finally, we were released, and we were so relieved! My father was waiting for us when we got off the ferry in San Francisco, and we traveled to Oakland where we would start our new lives in Gold Mountain — our name for America.

I was so upset by my experience that for 50 years I refused to talk about Angel Island. It was not until 1985 that I was able to talk and write about it.

8. Why do you think getting deported was so upsetting for people?

9. Were Li Keng's experiences at Angel Island more positive or more negative? Explain why.

Chapter 7: Growing Up in Oakland

We lived in Oakland's Chinatown from 1933 to 1948. Chinatown was a small enclave of four square blocks. Like us, most of the Chinese living here spoke the Toishan dialect because they came from the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province in southern China.

We attended American school and concentrated on learning English.

All the children in our neighborhood attended Lincoln Grammar School, a school within walking distance from Chinatown. The student body was made up of mostly Chinese, some Caucasians and a few Japanese. The students spoke Chinese and English. The new immigrants were put in limited-English-proficiency classes and received extra help. Sister Li Hong and I were assigned to these classes. Slowly we started to learn English.

We attended Chinese school after American school each day. We had very little time to play or to get into mischief. There was very little money during the Depression years. Even though life was hard, we loved being Americans.

Although we were now Americans, we did not know many Caucasian Americans except for the teachers at school. We socialized with the other Chinese Americans in Chinatown. Chinese Americans were not allowed to buy property in certain areas of Oakland because of racial prejudice. We were also not allowed to do certain jobs like law enforcement, government work, and many professions. Because of these restrictions, many Chinese opened restaurants, grocery stores, and laundries.

My father was one of those people. During World War II, my father opened a restaurant in Oakland's Chinatown. We children all worked in that restaurant - from waiting on tables to mopping the floor. We never got paid because, as a family business, we worked to make the restaurant succeed. The entire family worked seven days a week. Our hard work paid off when in 1948 we were able to purchase a home outside of Chinatown.



Asian children wait at Angel Island. The average Chinese immigrant waited two weeks. (Photo © California State Museum Resource Center)

10. America is known as the "melting pot" of different cultures. How did segregation and racism keep Chinese Americans from being part of American society? (use specific examples)

Chapter 8: My Life Today

I attended the University of California in the fall of 1944, but didn't graduate until 1950 because I took two years off to help in my parents' restaurant. Finally I received my teaching credentials and started my career in an elementary school. I taught for 35 years. I had a wonderful time working with young people. I retired in 1985.

Since my retirement, I decided to write my story, *Journey to Gold Mountain*, so that I could share my experiences with others. My story has been featured in a documentary film by Disney called *The American Tapestry*. I speak frequently at schools and civic and community organizations. I love volunteering, for it keeps me young at heart and lets me show my appreciation to the United States for allowing us to come here.

I've had a good life living here. I encounter very little prejudice today. I have many friends that span the color of the rainbow. My life is comfortable and my children are happy in their chosen professions. All my siblings are successful, law-abiding citizens. We have achieved our American Dream.

11. If Li Keng's parents were still alive today, do you think they would be happy with their choice to move to America? Why or why not?



Li Keng and her class in 1962.
(Photo courtesy of Li Keng Wong)