

# Then: The Immigration Act of 1924

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the changes to immigration laws in the past. There have been immigration laws throughout American history. Especially prior to the 1960s, most of these changes were made, in one way or another, to maintain white dominance in the United States. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Immigration Act of 1924
2. New Challenges
3. Context for Immigration Restrictions



## BEFORE YOU START

How have immigration restrictions changed over time?

## 1. The Immigration Act of 1924

Back in Unit 1, you read about the 1798 Alien Acts, which restricted immigration in response to fears about international threats. The Alien Acts didn't last, but they hinted at the immigration restrictions that were still to come. Although the practice was relatively unrestricted for the first half of the 19th century, limits on immigration began to increase in the 1870s. These limits were often targeted at immigrants from specific countries.

➦ **EXAMPLE** In 1882 the **Chinese Exclusion Act** was enacted, prohibiting Chinese laborers from entering the United States. The law was revised over time but stayed in effect in one form or another until the 1940s.

Angel Island was a U.S. immigration station built to process the applications of immigrants arriving primarily from Asia. It was in full operation from 1910 to 1940 and was responsible for helping to enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act. About one million immigrants were processed at Angel Island. About 100,000 Chinese were detained.

One way detainees could tell their story was to carve their writings in the walls. Below is an example of poetry carved on the wall of the Angel Island immigration station's detention barracks (Lai, Lim, & Yung, 2014).

### Primary Source Excerpt

**Type:** Poetry

**Author:** Unknown

**Date:** 1910-1940

*Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day,  
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about it?  
I look to see who is happy, but they only sit quietly.  
I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall asleep.  
The days are long and the bottle constantly empty;  
My sad mood, even so, is not dispelled.  
Nights are long and the pillow cold;  
Who can pity my loneliness?  
After experiencing such loneliness and sorrow,  
Why not just return home and learn to plow the fields?*

By the 1920s, opposition to immigration was still strong in some parts of American society. The Immigration Act of 1924 introduced limits on immigration from more Asian countries by using a quota system based on national origin. The quota system also allowed more immigrants from northern and western Europe to enter the United States while reducing immigration from eastern and southern Europe.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Chinese Exclusion Act

An 1882 law that prevented Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States.

## 2. New Challenges

By the 1930s, immigrants had to navigate a complicated bureaucracy and strict immigration laws in order to come to the United States. Below we see a page from the 1931 immigration application of Ng Shee. As an immigrant from China, she was granted a visa only because her husband already lived in the United States. Although allowed to enter the United States, she—like other Chinese immigrants—was prohibited from becoming a citizen (Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, n.d.).

**American Consular Service**  
at Hong Kong.

**NONQUOTA**  
**Immigration Visa**

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Passport No. \_\_\_\_\_, issued by \_\_\_\_\_  
on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, A.D. \_\_\_\_\_, valid  
until the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, A.D. \_\_\_\_\_

No. 18

Date: August 14, 1931.

SEEN:

The Bearer, Ng Shee, who  
is of Chinese nationality, having  
(Citizen or alien)

been seen and examined, is classified as a Nonquota  
as amended by Sub.div.C(4), Sec.13  
Immigrant under Subdivision (a) of Section 4 of the  
Immigration Act of 1924, as amended, and is granted  
this Immigration Visa pursuant to the provisions of  
said act.

The validity of this Immigration Visa expires on  
the 14th day of December  
A.D. 1931.

Douglas Jenkins  
DOUGLAS JENKINS,  
Consul General, of the  
United States of America.

Fee \$9.00.  
Fee No. 1305

Note: This Immigration Visa will not entitle the  
person to whom issued to enter the United States if,  
upon arrival in the United States, he is found to be in-  
admissible to the United States under the Immigration  
Laws. (Subdivision (g), Section 2, Immigration Act  
of 1924.)

PHOTOGRAPH ATTACHED  
AMERICAN  
CONSULAR SERVICE

Immigrant Identification General, 280640.

AMERICAN  
CONSULAR SERVICE  
HONG KONG.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE OFFICE, HONG KONG

*Ng Shee's 1931 application for an immigration visa*

Navigating the complicated immigration process required a great deal of **agility** and **problem solving**. Immigrants used critical thinking to understand complex documents, and often to marshal evidence to make a case to immigration agencies. Many immigrants also had to gain new communication skills by learning English. And, in addition to these challenges, many immigrants struggled to join a society that did not welcome them.

### 3. Context for Immigration Restrictions

To understand immigration restrictions, we need to consider their historical context—what else was happening when the restrictions were implemented. For instance, in the 1870s, many white Californians felt economically threatened by Chinese immigrants. They worried that the immigrants, who were desperate for employment, would accept lower wages and take jobs away from white workers. This is part of the historical context that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act. Like that act, the Immigration Act of 1924 was based in both nativism and fear of economic competition from immigrant workers. As you read earlier, fear of competition for jobs is still a cause of concern for people who want to limit immigration to the United States.

Historical context is key to understanding limits on immigration that were enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As we'll see in the next lesson, it's also an essential part of examining one of the darkest episodes of U.S. history.



## Agility: Why Employers Care

In your professional life, you'll encounter many situations where you'll need to evaluate historical context and cause and impact before you make a decision. That might mean trying to decipher why a past business decision was ineffective, considering a patient's medical history, or looking at the professional successes in your own life so you can replicate your accomplishments in the future. Whatever the situation, your ability to step outside yourself and consider other perspectives is critical to staying agile every day and solving problems personally and professionally!



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that immigration laws have evolved over time to restrict the numbers of immigrants coming to the U.S. and to control their place of origin. **The Immigration Act of 1924** was notable for imposing a quota system that favored immigrants from northern and western Europe. Immigration restrictions posed **new challenges** for immigrants seeking to migrate to America and, once arrived, to assimilate. You also learned that economic concerns have consistently provided the **context for immigration restrictions**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

## REFERENCES

Lai, H. M., Lim, G., & Yung, J. (2014). *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants On Angel Island, 1910-1940*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

*The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act)*. (n.d.). Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute. [www.history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act](http://www.history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act)



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Ng Shee's 1931 application for an immigration visa](#) | Author: National Archives at Boston | License: Public Domain



## TERMS TO KNOW

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An 1882 law that prevented Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States.