

Teaching the Asian American Experience: Lesson Plans and Teacher Resources

LESSON PLAN:

Challenges to Success – Perpetual Foreigner



This photograph was taken at a rally in Chinatown in Washington, DC in March 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a rise in anti-Asian and anti-Chinese violence that was often rooted in the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype.



Committee of 100



The
Asian
American
Education
Project

LESSON PLAN:

Challenges to Success – Perpetual Foreigner

Overview

This lesson plan supports the Committee of 100's report entitled, "[From Foundations to Frontiers: Chinese American Contributions to the Fabric of America](#)." It addresses the sections entitled, "Building an Economic Powerhouse" (p. 26), "Strengthening American Institutions" (p. 38), and "Threading the Social Fabric" (p. 49). More specifically, it focuses on how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype has been and is used against Chinese Americans to inhibit their success and achievement in the United States, across various fields and sectors of society.

In this lesson, students will learn how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype has impacted Chinese Americans in the fields of science and technology, civic engagement, and the arts. Students will identify the specific ways that this stereotype has manifested, from racial profiling to exclusion and more. Students will analyze how this specific form of racism and xenophobia creates barriers and challenges for Chinese Americans.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Define the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype
- Describe how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype impacts Chinese Americans
- Analyze how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype creates barriers to success for Chinese Americans

ESSAY:

Challenges to Success – Perpetual Foreigner

Those with Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritages are affected by the [Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype](#). This stereotype suggests that people who look “Asian” are outsiders or foreigners. It doesn’t matter if they were born in the United States. It doesn’t matter if they live in the United States. It doesn’t matter if their families have been here for generations. It positions Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) as always being different. They are not seen as “Americans.” This stereotype has affected many different [fields](#).

The stereotype has been used against the AAPI community. This has happened since they arrived in the United States. It started when the Chinese [migrated](#) in large numbers in the 1850s. Chinese immigrants were seen as different. They wore “strange” clothes. They spoke a “strange” language. They had “strange” customs. Laws were passed to ban them from immigrating. Laws also denied them equal opportunities. Laws have also led to their incarceration. In addition, Chinese and other Asian immigrants were often victims of anti-Asian attacks. This was all allowed because they were seen as foreigners.

The Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype is also evident in the area of science and technology. For example, Chinese scientists have been [racially profiled](#). Since the 1950s, scientists of Chinese [descent](#) in the United States have been accused of being Chinese spies. Some even faced criminal charges. Some cases were valid. But many of the charges were dismissed.

Even the White House has suspected the Chinese government of spying. They accused them of using students to collect [intellectual property](#). This led to the suspension or limitation of visas. The United States was especially suspicious of students involved in China’s [civil-military fusion program](#). These students were denied visas to study in the United States. There are also [legislative](#) proposals to restrict all Chinese graduate students from studying STEM-related subjects. Such decisions are fueled by the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. This negatively impacts Chinese Americans’ access to opportunities. By cutting off talent sources, it also negatively impacts the country’s ability to innovate.

This distrust of Chinese American scientists is a problem. It has kept the United States from tapping into their talents. It has kept Chinese students from coming to the United States to study. The Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype must actively be overcome. More and more Chinese Americans are breaking through. In recent years, there has been an increase in foreign students in the United States from China. Many of these students are majoring in [STEM](#). STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math. These areas are critical to U.S. national security and interests. Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans have greatly contributed to U.S. innovations in science and technology.

The Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype also affects the area of voting. Initially, many Chinese and other AAPI immigrants were denied the right to vote. However, laws have changed. The number of [eligible](#) Chinese American voters grew by 57% between 2008 and 2018. Yet, voter [turnout rates](#) for Chinese American voters remain low. One major reason for this is that Chinese Americans are not seen as “Americans.” Their issues and concerns are often ignored. Candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties have historically failed to reach out to AAPI communities. As members of U.S. society, AAPI communities should be actively included in shaping the nation’s future. Their votes should count. As such, broader efforts are needed to engage Chinese American voters with U.S. politics.

In the arts, the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype has hurt AAPI [creatives](#). Artists of AAPI descent are expected to make “Asian” art. Such art is rarely seen as “American.” At best, it has been seen as a bridge between “Eastern” and “Western” art. This is very limiting. It is also dismissive. Increasing the visibility of Chinese and other minorities in American arts culture could open up new innovations in this field.

Barriers like stereotypes prevent individuals and communities from achieving their full potential. Removing such barriers will allow U.S. society to grow, thrive, and innovate.

**This text is an excerpt from the Committee of 100’s report entitled, “From Foundations to Frontiers: Chinese American Contributions to the Fabric of America.” It has been adapted for reading accessibility and clarity.*

Vocabulary¹

Civil-Military Fusion Program

China's national strategy to build China's economic and technological achievements into military power

Creatives

People who pursue careers in creative fields such as the visual and performing arts

Descent

The origin or background of a person in terms of family or nationality; heritage and/or ancestry

Eligible

Being qualified or permitted to do or be something

Incarceration

The act of imprisoning someone or the state of being imprisoned

Intellectual Property

Any intellectual creation, concepts, ideas, inventions, or work that are protected by law as belonging to the creator

Fields

Disciplines or areas of study

Foreign

Outside a place or country; not belonging to this country

Legislative

Relating to the branch of government that is charged with such powers as making laws, levying and collecting taxes, and making financial appropriations

Migrate

Move from one area to another

Perpetual

Never-ending or forever

Racial Profiling

The act of suspecting or targeting a person on the basis of their race

STEM

A word that means Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math

Stereotype

An idea that many people have about a thing or a group that may often be untrue or only partly true and is often negative

Turnout Rates

Participation rates of a given election

Visas

Endorsement on a passport by the proper authorities showing that it's been examined and the bearer may proceed

¹Definition is adapted from [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)

Discussion Questions

What is the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype?

How has the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype been used against Chinese Americans and other AAPI groups? How has this stereotype showed up in various fields/professions?

In what ways is the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype a barrier and challenge for Chinese Americans and other AAPI groups?

What are some of the broader impacts of stereotyping?

ACTIVITY 1:

Introducing the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

(Suggested Time: 20 minutes)

- A. Have students do a Quickwrite on what they know about stereotypes. If needed, use the following guiding questions:
1. What is a stereotype?
 2. Have you been stereotyped? Have people unfairly judged you? How did that make you feel?
 3. Why do people stereotype?
- B. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
1. Why do people stereotype?
 2. Where do stereotypes come from? How do we learn stereotypes?
- C. Tell students: "We are all susceptible to believing and spreading stereotypes because of the way that they are part of narratives we see in the media, the different systems that impact our lives (i.e., criminal/legal system, immigration, education, healthcare, etc.), how people relate to one another, and more. Stereotypes are everywhere."
- D. Have students draw a picture of what an "American" looks like. Have students work in small groups and discuss the similarities and differences between their images.
- E. Have students watch this video entitled, "[I am an American](#)." Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
1. What did the video show?
 2. What is the message behind the video?
 3. Why are Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders not always perceived to be Americans? Why is this problematic?
- F. Write the following definition for stereotype and display for all to see: "A stereotype is an idea that many people have about a thing or a group that may often be untrue or only partly true and is often negative." Allow students the opportunity to revise and/or shape this definition.
- G. Tell students: "We all have a shared responsibility to reflect and consider which stereotypes we might hold and their impacts on other people and groups. This lesson covers a specific stereotype - the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype - and how it impacts Chinese Americans. Although the lesson focuses on Chinese Americans, the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype also impacts other Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, as well as other communities of color, like Latinx Americans, Arab Americans, etc."



This photograph shows a mother walking with two children in San Francisco Chinatown before 1910 (date unknown). When Chinese immigrants began to arrive and settle in the late 1800s, they were seen as different, strange, and foreign.

Photo credit: "Credit: California Historical Society, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons California Historical Society](#)"

ACTIVITY 2:

Understanding the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

(Suggested Time: 60 minutes)

This cartoon entitled, "What Shall We Do with Our Boys," was published in *The Wasp*, a San Francisco-based magazine, on March 3, 1882. Images like this were commonly seen in mass media publications to spread anti-Chinese sentiment and create stereotypes of Chinese people. Chinese immigrants were portrayed as foreign and a threat to white workers' jobs



- A. Have students read the essay. Consider the following options:
1. OPTION 1: Have students read the essay independently either for homework or during class time.
 2. OPTION 2: Read aloud the essay and model annotating.
 3. OPTION 3: Have students read aloud in pairs or small groups.
- B. Facilitate a class discussion by asking the following questions:
1. What is the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype?
 2. How has the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype been used against Chinese Americans and other AAPI groups? How has this stereotype showed up in various fields/professions?
 3. In what ways is the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype a barrier and challenge for Chinese Americans and other AAPI groups?
 4. What are some of the broader impacts of stereotyping?
- C. Have students identify prominent Asian Americans. Write student responses down and display for all to see. Have students watch this news video entitled, "[More Americans See Asian Americans as 'Perpetual Foreigners.'](#)" Have students review their list of prominent Asian Americans. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
1. What more did you learn from this video?
 2. Why don't people know more prominent Asian Americans? Why is this problematic?
 3. What are the causes of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype?
 4. What are the effects of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype?
- D. Distribute the worksheet entitled, "[Perpetual Foreigner – Extended Definition.](#)" Have students complete the worksheet in order to build on their conceptualization of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. Encourage students to use what they learned from the text and videos.

Photo credit: George Frederick Keller, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

ACTIVITY 3:

The Impacts of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

(Suggested Time: 60 minutes)



In Activity 3, students have the option to research Chinese Americans and how they were affected by the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. Students may research U.S. Representative Judy Chu (left), U.S. Army soldier Danny Chen (center), or Wong Kim Ark (right) who fought for citizenship in the case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898), among others.

Teachers can have students complete one or more of the following options:

- A. OPTION 1: Have students read the article entitled, "[In America, Asians Are Treated Like Perpetual Foreigners.](#)" Individually or in small groups, have students select an event mentioned in the article to research and then complete the worksheet entitled, "[Event Analysis.](#)" Have students present their findings to the class. Facilitate a discussion by asking: "What is the impact of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype on the Chinese/Asian American community?"

- A. OPTION 2: Divide students into small groups and assign each group to study one of the following Chinese Americans:
 - 1. Anna May Wong (actress)
 - 1. Eugene Moy (newspaper editor)
 - 1. Xiaoxing Xi (physicist and university professor)
 - 1. Judy Chu (U.S. Representative from California)
 - 1. Wong Kim Ark (laborer)
 - 1. Vincent Chin (auto worker) *
 - 1. Danny Chen (U.S. Army soldier) *
 - 1. Have students create a visual timeline of the person's life including how they were affected by the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype and how they overcame it.
 - 1. Have students present their findings to the class. Facilitate a discussion by asking: "What is the impact of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype on the Chinese/Asian American community?"

**These individuals' experiences include violence and death as a result of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype.*

Photo credits: Left: Eric Connolly, House Creative Services, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#), Center: JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#), Right: National Archives and Records Administration, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

ACTIVITY 4:

Educating the Public on the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

(Suggested Time: 60 minutes)

This photograph was taken at a rally in Seattle in January 2017. In Activity 4, students will create a poster or ad campaign educating the general public about the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype.

- A. Have students create a poster or ad campaign educating the general public about the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype and encouraging the general public not to perpetuate it. Have students include a definition, causes, barriers, impacts on Chinese Americans, impacts on American society more broadly, and specific examples. Have students use visuals, videos, taglines, and more.



Photo credit: Nitish Meena Nitishm, CCO, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Extension Activities

(Suggested time per Option: 30-60 minutes)

- A. Have students make a one-page infographic that describes and refutes the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. Have them define the stereotype and provide at least two data points or concrete examples that counter the stereotype.
- B. Have students read the following article, entitled "[Perpetual Foreigner to Model Minority: The Tortured Evolution of Chinese Identity in America](#)." Then, have students create and complete a Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting the two stereotypes discussed in the article (i.e., Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner). Have students write a brief explanation of how the stereotypes impact Chinese Americans.
- C. Divide the class into five groups and have each group watch a different segment of the [PBS "be/longing: Asian Americans Now"](#) series. Have each group write a short response to the video, covering the individual being profiled in their video and how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype has impacted or relates to them. Have each group present their findings.
- D. Have students read "[Combatting the AAPI Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype](#)" and write a short argumentative essay on how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype is false and misleading, using data and findings from the article.
- E. Have students think of a time when they felt like an outsider and have them journal about their feelings. Have them think of a time when they were an insider and have them journal about their feelings. Have them analyze what it means to an outsider versus an insider and which position they liked better and why.

Additional Fictional Resources

- A. *American as Paneer Pie* by Supriya Kelkar (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2021) - Have students discuss how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype impacts the Indian American community in this book. Have students discuss how Lekha and Avantika's thoughts and actions are influenced by their own beliefs about the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. Have students reflect on the title of the book and make a connection to the readings or videos in this lesson.
- B. *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (First Second, 2008) - Have students discuss how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype is portrayed in the book and what the author's purpose is with the character Chin-Ke. Have students watch the television adaptation on Disney+ and create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast how the book and television series depict the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype.
- C. *Finally Seen* by Kelly Yang (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2023) – Have students compare and contrast the experiences of Lina and Millie. Have students evaluate the extent to which their struggles are rooted in the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype.
- D. *In the Beautiful Country* by Jane Kuo (Quill Tree Books, 2023) – Have students discuss how the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype impacts Anna and her family when they immigrate to the United States. Have students analyze specific examples of racism they face and discuss whether or not they are rooted in the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype.

Further Information

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Chinese Exclusion Act and the Exclusion of Asians, Pacific Islanders & Chinese Women](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Perpetual Foreigner– Systemic Racism Against Asian Americans](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Breaking the Color Line in Hollywood: Beulah Ong Kwoh, Actor](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[APIDAs on the Big Screen](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[McCarthyism and Profiling](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[From Outrage to Organizing: The Impact of the Vincent Chin Case](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Stand Against Hatred](#)"



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