

LESSON 3:**CONDITIONS IN CHINA: WHY MIGHT ONE LEAVE HOME FOREVER?****Focus Question**

What was life like for the peasant farmers of China? What circumstances might drive them to consider emigration?

Objectives

Students will:

- Read and identify the main events and ideas of two primary texts.
- Interpret these ideas to describe what was difficult about the lives of peasant farmers in China.
- Demonstrate their understanding in illustration, poetry, and brief writing.

Key Theme

Emigration is a hard choice for people to make. Usually there are reasons that drive people to leave their home country, and related but different reasons for the pull of the immigrant country. Sometimes departure is caused by emergency situations, but many Chinese emigrants had endured decades – even centuries – of difficult circumstances. In the mid-19th – mid-20th centuries Chinese people, especially in southern China, faced famine, extreme poverty and political unrest.

Grades

4-8

Time

One 80 minute session, or two 40 minutes.

Materials

- Student folders for primary documents and instructions
- A copy of the primary texts for each student:
 - “The Life of a Peasant” Han Dynasty letter to the Emperor Wendi, AD 178
 - “Watching the Wheat Reapers” poem by Po Chü-Yi (AD 772-846)
- Journals for notes and final writing (Often described as “interactive journals”). If journals are not used, the teacher needs to devise another system for keeping documents and recording responses attractively. Folders or construction paper “journals” can be equally creative.
- Teacher resource: Examples of “A Moment in Time” drawing activity can be found in *The Message of Ancient Days* Houghton Mifflin textbook

Standards

California History-Social Science Content Standards, Language Arts Content Standards

Teacher information

The primary sources studied in this lesson were written in the 1st and 8th centuries AD. They are followed by a lesson in which contemporary statements by immigrants are read, because a comparison with these show that circumstances had changed little for the people most likely to emigrate from China. Two primary source documents are included but it is satisfactory to use just one, and it is also possible to use either of the two strategies, A Moment in Time, and Found Poem, with either text.

Procedure

- 1. Homework:** Assign students to read the two texts for understanding and gathering evidence. Have students write the focus question on the texts to guide their reading: “What was life like for the peasant farmers of China? What circumstances might drive them to emigrate?” Have students make notes in the margins or star against useful evidence for class discussion.
- 2. Reading & Discussion: “Life of a Peasant”** Have students read the text aloud around the class, reading one sentence each. Discuss briefly why the letter was written: What might the peasants want the Emperor to do? Have students identify (by underlining) and discuss information that would help to answer the focus question and number four facts in the text.
- 3. Drawing assignment: A Moment in Time.** Have students attach the text in their journal on one page of a double spread. The students will make a drawing opposite the text in the journal. Each student chooses a key image from the text, and draws it in the center of the page. Around the image, in discrete blocks of a sentence or two each, they write facts that describe what life was like for the peasants, including the four underlined facts. This can be completed for homework.
- 4. Reading & Discussion: “The Wheat Reapers”** Read the poem aloud. Then have students read it aloud. Analyze the poem briefly: What is happening? What is the feeling? What is the point of view of the writer? Have students identify phrases and lines that could answer the focus questions: What was life like for the peasant farmers of China? What circumstances might drive them to consider emigration? Discuss possible meanings.
- 5. Writing Assignment: Found Poem.** Have students independently underline up to 10 words/phrases/lines that help to answer the focus question. Urge them to choose phrases that are key ideas that express strong meaning or feeling or are vivid and relevant images.
6. Students can work alone or in pairs for the written assignment. Out of their underlined words/phrases from either one or both texts have students create a “found poem” of ten lines. They are to make a sequential and meaningful text that expresses the forces that might impel people to emigrate. Their poem is to be strong and dramatic. Students can reorganize the phrases and words. They may choose to repeat an important word or

phrase. They can make minor changes in grammar or word form, but they may not add their own words. When they are satisfied with their draft, each student writes a good copy in the journal. The original poem is attached on the opposite page. The poems are recited to the class, and followed by a discussion asking the class “What might emigrants hope for?”

7. **Final Response: Journal writing as assessment** (Done in class or as homework.) Have student write the following heading: What factors might impel people to emigrate, and what might people hope for in their new country? Direct them to choose at least six phrases, lines, ideas or facts from either text that will help them to answer the question. Students should write each phrase on one page, then write the response on the opposite page. The responses should provide answers to the focus questions. Students should write thoughtfully and make the hopes explicit: not “a better life” but “more education for a better job,” or “growing more food for my family with less work,” etc.

Adaptations

- *Accelerated learners:* Set a higher standard for the structure and coherence of all writing.
- *Lower performing students and ESL.* Teacher reads the text aloud, and then has guiding questions for an ERT-“everyone read to find out” activity. Written assignments can be modified for fewer facts and simpler writing. The Moment in Time drawing is more suitable for these students than a Found Poem. Poems and drawings can be also prepared for display.

Prepared by Keren Abra with the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation.

STUDENT HANDOUT

Name _____ Date _____

The Life of a Peasant

In A.D. 178, the Chinese emperor Wendi received a petition which described the life of peasants:

“Today, of a peasant family five members, two are forced to perform corvees [days of public work at no pay]. The area of the fields that the family is capable of cultivating does not exceed 100 mu, and the harvest from a field of 100 mu is rarely more than 100 shi of seed.

“In spring they plough, in summer they weed, in autumn they reap, in winter they gather in. They also have to cut wood for the winter, repair public buildings and engage in many other public works as part of their corvees. In spring they are exposed to the biting wind and dust; in summer they are subjected to the burning sun; numbed by the autumn rains, they shiver in winter. They have not a single day of rest in a whole year. And in this life of toil they must also find time for their family duties: accompanying departing members, receiving those who arrive, going to funerals, visiting the sick, caring for orphans and bringing up their children. They are harassed by a thousand chores, and further overwhelmed by natural disasters—drought or floods. They must submit to the injunctions of a too-hurried government, unseasonable collection of taxes, orders given in the morning and countermanded in the evening. So those who have some property sell it at half its value; those who own nothing borrow and undertake to repay twice the amount, so that finally the peasant is often obliged to sell all his property, his fields, his house and sometimes even his children and grandchildren to settle his debts.”

As you read this petition, the life of the peasant was a very hard one. Each year every male between the ages of 23 and 56 had an obligation to work one month for the government—perhaps transporting goods on rivers or canals, as a miner in a state-owned iron or salt mine, as a road-builder, or as a laborer on any other project considered necessary. They lived at the mercy of nature since flood or drought could destroy their livelihood. Plagues and hard winters that left them with little food were constant threats.

100 Mu = 11 acres.

Source: Pirassoli-t’Serstevens, Michele. *The Han Civilization of China*. (Translated by Janet Seligman). Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982. pp. 14-15

STUDENT HANDOUT

Name _____ Date _____

**Watching the Wheat-reapers
from Po Chu-Yi (772-846)**

Farm families have few leisure months,
In the fifth month chores double up.
When south wind rises at night,
Fields and dikes are covered with golden wheat.

Women old and young carry baskets of food,
Children and toddlers bring out porridge in pots,
Following each other with food for the farmhands,
Those stout fellows on the southern knoll.

Their feet steamed by the sultry vapor from the soil,
Their backs scorched by the sun's burning light;
Drained of all strength to feel any heat,
Their only regret, summer days are too short.

Then there are those poor womenfolk,
Their children clinging to their side.
With their right hand they pick up leftover grains;
On their left arm dangles a broken basket.

To hear their words of complaint---
All who listen will grieve for them:
Their family land stripped clean to pay tax,
They now glean the field to fill their stomach.

What deeds of merit have I done?
I've neither farmed nor raised silkworms;
My official's salary, three hundred piculs of rice,
And at year's end there is surplus grain to eat.

Thinking of this, I feel guilty and ashamed;
All day long I cannot keep it out of my mind.

Source: Stearns, Peter N., editor and others. *Documents in World History, Volume I, The Great Traditions: From Ancient Times to 1500*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1998.