

# Li Hong



A Child from China (composite)  
c. 1890

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## Teacher Introduction

Li Hong is a composite character. His story is based on a combination of information about Chinese men and teen boys living in California in the mid to late 1800s. Family stories provide rich details about ancestors who came to the United States in search of work during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, the stories of Chinese who lived and worked in the Hayward area are not easy to find. We had to piece together general information about the Chinese experience in the region with various local histories. Li Hong's story is therefore an educated composite of the life of a Chinese boy in this area in the late 1880s.

In 1890, the population of the Eden Township included 7,336 whites, 538 Chinese, 10 Japanese, 6 "colored", and 3 Indians. There were four Chinese students registered in local schools. There is very little recorded history of these early Chinese living in the Hayward area. What we do know is that they were instrumental in major construction projects of the time. Li Hong's story is set around the building of Lake Chabot Dam, then known as San Leandro Dam. From 1874 to 1892, a dam was constructed along San Leandro Creek to create a water supply for Oakland.

In 1980 the East Bay Municipal Utilities District began a project to upgrade Lake Chabot Dam to Federal earthquake standards. In so doing, 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese artifacts were uncovered from beneath a slope covered in poison oak. George Miller, Professor of Anthropology at California State University East Bay was called in to excavate the area. The dig unearthed many artifacts used by the Chinese builders of the dam which helped scholars better understand the daily lives of Chinese in the Hayward area, a history that had been buried for more than 80 years. Out of the more than 800 workers that inhabited the camp near the Hayward dam over a period of 20 years only four names are known, Ah Bing, Lock Sing, Toy Sing, and Kim Yuen. All four men were killed in a tunnel collapse, a testament to the dangers of their work. As a tribute to the men who formed the foundation of the dam by packing the earth with wild horses Professor Miller's team named the site Yema-Po, a name that means "Wild horse slope" in Cantonese.

Chinese represent the first Asian immigrants to the United States and the first to be discriminated against. Chinese had been in the Americas since at least the 1500s with the Spanish explorers and traders. But it wasn't until the California Gold Rush that large numbers began to arrive. Between 1850 and 1860 an estimated 60,000 Chinese came to the United States. In 1852,

almost 20,000 came in just one year. Almost all of them were men in search of work.

These 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants were leaving behind an impoverished and war torn homeland. Most were farmers from the Pearl River Delta region and most left their families behind. They intended to work in the U.S. and return home with great wealth. Most did not.

The discovery of gold in California brought people from all corners of the world. But *Gum San* (Gold Mountain, as it was known in China) did not welcome the Chinese. Prejudice against them rose quickly. White miners and businessmen saw them as a threat. Yet despite the legal, economic, and social challenges they faced, the Chinese worked hard and became successful. In addition to mining, they set up businesses, particularly restaurants and laundries, in San Francisco and other cities. They also worked in the cigar, shoe, garment, and wool industries and opened up herbal medicine shops.

The first Chinese laundry was opened in 1851 by Wah Lee in San Francisco. By 1870 there were 2,000 such businesses. There were undoubtedly Chinese owned businesses in the Hayward area. A newspaper account from 1899 refers to a wash house at the corner of B Street and Watkins Street in Hayward owned by Win Lee. Certainly there were more such businesses, but the historical record is sparse.

As the gold fields dried up and large mining interests squeezed out individual miners, the Chinese, like most miners, had to find new ways to make a living. Many returned to farming. For the most part, the Chinese were not able to own land. So as tenant farmers, they grew fruits and vegetables – introducing new species to American soil and developing new varieties of crops. Newspaper accounts from the 1870s and 1880s refer to Chinese laborers working on farms throughout the area and they also worked in the canneries. The railroad magnates were drawn to the Chinese men's industrious culture. Charles Crocket, one of the "big four" in the Central Pacific, told his partners that if the Chinese could build the Great Wall of China, they could build anything. Indeed, despite the rugged terrain of the west, the Chinese were able to lay almost 700 miles of track and do it far more efficiently than their white (predominantly Irish) counterparts building the railroad coming from the east. During the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, the Chinese labor force leveled the roadbeds, tunneled through mountains, and laid track.

The life of Chinese men in the United States during the 1800s and early 1900s was marred by loneliness. They had not brought their families with them and most had intended to return home after working and earning

money. But immigration laws almost completely prevented women and children from coming to America. The timeline included in Li Hong's story provides additional information about the legal barriers faced by Chinese immigrants.

Li Hong and those who worked to build Lake Chabot Dam certainly felt the sting of prejudice throughout their lives here. It is important for students to understand that despite discrimination, the Chinese and Chinese Americans were instrumental in the development of California and the West.

## Student Introduction



Ni hoa, (NEE-How) my name is Li Hong. In my culture we put out last name first and our first name last, my first name is Hong and my last name is Li. I was born on a small farming village in China in 1880, the year of the dragon. Now I live in a camp near the San Leandro Dam. I speak Cantonese with the other men in the camp. My cousin Li Wen and I came to California to find work. We heard stories of the Land of the Flower Flag and knew it was the land of opportunity. Others from our village came here to work and made enough money to help their families back home.

Our families at home were having a hard time living in our village. We knew it was our turn to go to the United States to work.

## The Voyage

Leaving my village was very hard. I knew I would miss Ma Ma, my sisters, and my grandfather. They were very excited for me as I packed my things. But they were also sad that I had to leave.

Li Wen and I put our clothing, rice, and biscuits in bamboo baskets. Po Po gave us a celadon rice bowl and tea cup set so we would think of her everyday. The last thing we packed was the money given to us by our Uncle and the rest of the family. It took months to save enough money for each of us to buy passage on the ship.

We left early in the morning and headed along the road to Hong Kong. We left before anyone woke up so that they would not say anything to us that might cause bad luck.



In Hong Kong we boarded a ship and set sail for the Land of the Flower Flag. There were many other men and boys from our village and other villages from the province on board – all going to find work.

Our rice and biscuits were gone within a few days. Luckily, there was more rice on board, but there wasn't much else to eat. Many of the other passengers were sea sick. Li Wen and I helped two men who were very sick by getting them food and water. To pass the time we played mah jong and fán t'án.

After more than two months, we finally arrived in the harbor of San Francisco. We were happy to be on land but we also felt scared being in a new place where we did not speak the language.

## Reaching San Francisco

Back home we had met a man who told us about work in California. He had helped many men find work building the fire wagon and he knew of more jobs in California. He had helped us plan our journey and gave us instructions for when we got to San Francisco. We were supposed to meet a man called Wong Ming.

It wasn't too hard to find Wong Ming. In San Francisco, almost all the Chinese people lived in one neighborhood called Chinatown. It was just like being in a big city like Hong Kong. There were shops and restaurants all selling Chinese clothes, food, and music. It was almost as if we hadn't even crossed the ocean.



After meeting Wong Ming at his office, he told us to stay overnight in town and get a good night's rest. Before we went to bed that night, we used our last few pennies to buy pork and rice for dinner. We had just enough to pay a man to write a letter to our family back home letting them know we arrived safely in California.

That night we slept at an apartment of several men from our village that came to California seeking gum san. As I lay in bed, even though I was very tired, I had a hard time falling asleep. I was thinking about our long journey across the ocean and I was trying to get used to being on solid ground again. But most of all I was excited and nervous about what was next. Finally, I feel asleep.

In the morning, we traveled across the bay. It was the first time I realized we really were in a new land. Nothing looked familiar.

## Shovel Men

Li Wen and I found work at company owned by Mr. Anthony Chabot. Mr. Chabot had come to California in search of gold. He was good at building things and getting water to go where people could use it. For the past several years he had been the leader for a dam building project.



Many workers were needed to build a big structure like a dam. Most of the workers were Chinese men who came to gum san to make money. Many of them worked on building tracks for the fire wagon. Others, like Li Wen and I, had just arrived from China. There were white men working on the dam, too, but most of them were the bosses of the work crews. Some were blacksmiths and masons and some took care of the horses and mules.

We were called the “shovel men,” because our main job was to move dirt with our shovels to build the dam wall strong enough to hold back the water.

## Life in the Camp

The men who lived in the camp for a long time set it up to be just like home. We had many things from China – rice bowls, tea cups, woks, and games. Cooks made food that we all enjoyed: pork, noodles, rice, pickled eggs, all covered in soy sauce.

But it was very hard to live there. The bosses and townspeople did not like us even though we worked very hard to build Mr. Chabot's dam. Sometimes they called us mean names like "Coolie." We heard that many of our people were moving to Chinatown in San Francisco. It was better to be there because everyone spoke the same language and celebrated the same traditions.



In the camp we tried to celebrate holidays like Lunar New Year and the Ching Ming Festival but it was not the same without our families. Li Wen and I thought back to last year's New Years celebration in our village. PowPow put a red silk cloth on the table and she and our aunts cooked up a big feast. I can still taste all the sweets: candied ginger, coconut strips, lichee nuts, and sweet and sour plums. Then, after everyone was full our aunts and uncles would pass out red envelopes with money inside for good luck. My favorite part of the night was the New Year celebration firecrackers to frighten away evil spirits.

## Vocabulary

Year of the Dragon- Chinese zodiac sign on the lunar calendar

Cantonese- language spoken by people from the Canton region of China

Ni-Hoa- “Hello” in Cantonese

Li Wen- Li Hong’s cousin’s name

Land of the Flower Flag- the United States of America; the stars looked like flowers to Chinese immigrants

Ma-Ma- “Mother” in Cantonese

Celadon- a type of pottery, usually very valuable

Hong Kong- a big city in China

Province- similar to a state

Mah-Jong- a gambling game played in China

Fan t’an- a gambling game played in China

Fire wagon- a train

Gum san- “Gold Mountain” in Cantonese, a nick-name for the state of California during the gold rush

Mr. Anthony Chabot- the builder of Lake Chabot Dam

Dam- a wall built to stop water from flowing

Blacksmith- a person who makes shoes for horses

Mason- a person who builds with stone

Wok- a large bowl-shaped frying pan used to cook Chinese food

Coolie- a rude name for a worker from China

Chinatown- a neighborhood within a U.S. city where mostly Chinese people live

Lunar New Year- an important holiday celebrating the new year according to the lunar calendar

Ching Ming Festival- a holiday to remember loved ones who have died

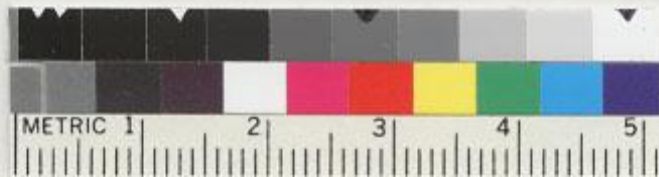
Pow Pow- “Grandmother” in Cantonese

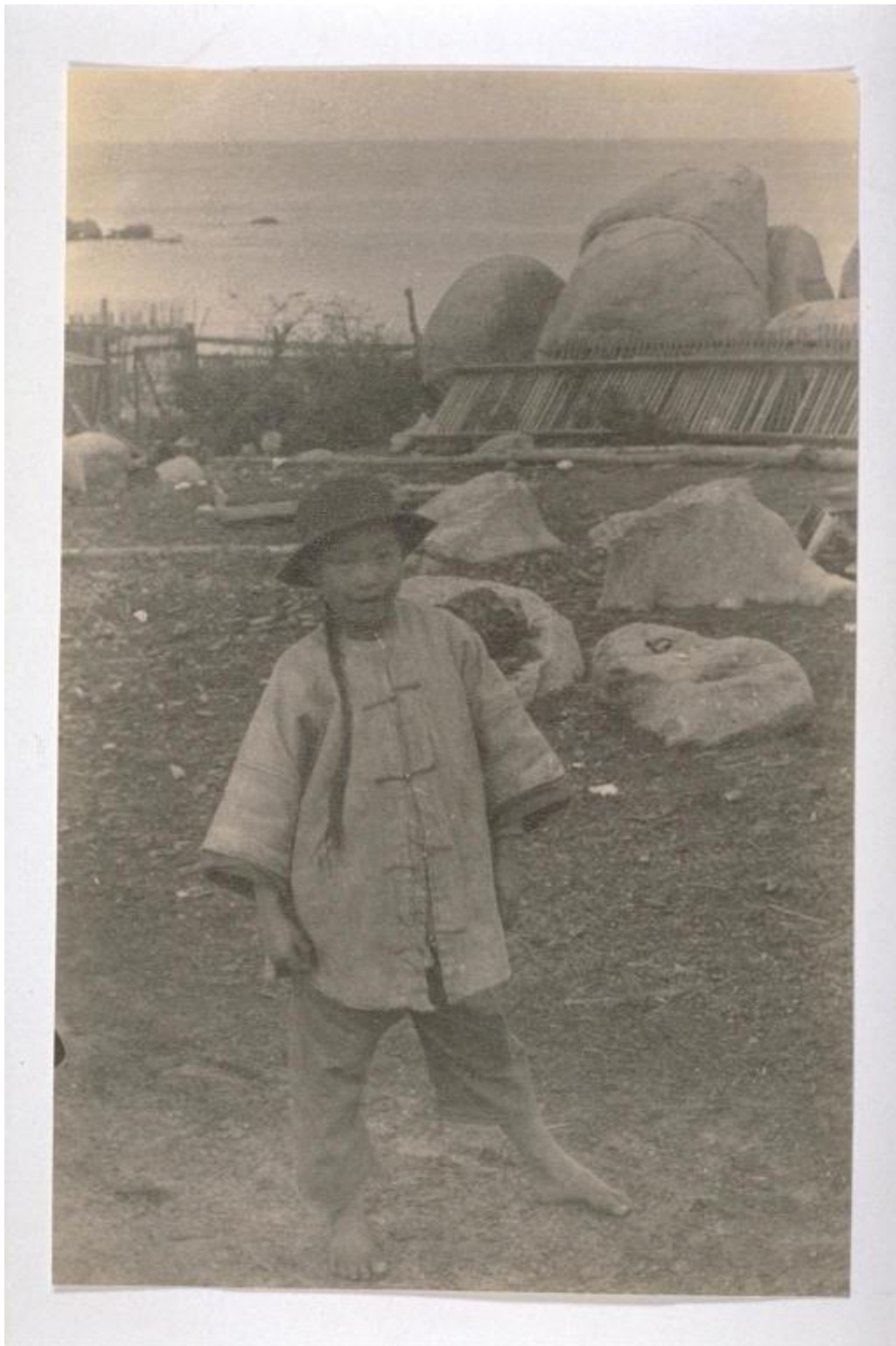
Red envelope- a common gift during New Year celebrations

## Images















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## Lesson Plan – Li Hong



### 1 Counting with Characters

#### Activity Goals

- ✓ To learn about the Chinese writing system
- ✓ To discover the traditional art of calligraphy

#### Setting the Context

Although there are many different languages and dialects spoken in China, there is only one written language called Chinese. There are no letters or alphabet in Chinese. Instead, symbols are used to represent syllables of words. These symbols are called characters or Hanzi. It takes a long time to memorize the more than 4,000 characters in the Chinese language and even longer to learn how to write them.

Writing Chinese is not only practical; it is one of the three traditional Chinese art forms, calligraphy. In Chinese calligraphy a brush is used to apply ink onto paper. The strokes of the artists hand are important in shaping the character they want to make.

In this classroom activity students will compare and contrast Chinese characters with Arabic numerals, practice writing numbers 1-10 in Chinese, and create their own numbering system.

#### Activity Instructions

1. Give each student a Numbering Sheet
2. Ask students to compare and contrast the shape and form of both sets of numbers
3. Allow students to practice writing numbers as Chinese characters
4. After the students have completed steps 1-3 direct them to create their own numbers system

## Lesson Plan – Li Hong



### 2 Chinese New Year Activity

#### Activity Goals

- ✓ To learn about the Chinese calendar
- ✓ To discover the animals of the Chinese calendar and their attributes
- ✓ To choose an animal avatar based on the Chinese calendar

#### Setting the Context

Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year is the most important holiday in Chinese culture. It is celebrated on the first day of the new year containing a new moon. The Chinese calendar counts years by groups of sixty. Each of these periods has cycles of twelve years with each determined by one of the five elements: wood, fire, air, water, and earth. Each year is named after an animal. In addition, each two hour period in the day is governed by an animal. The characteristics of the animals are believed to determine the way people will act.

The animals are believed to have been the only animals that arrived when Buddha summoned all of the creatures of the earth. As a reward, Buddha gave each animal a year in the cycle and declared anyone born in that year would resemble the animal in some way. The order of years in the Chinese calendar is rat (zi), ox (chou), tiger (yin), rabbit (mao), dragon (chen), snake (si), horse (wu), sheep (wei), monkey (shen), rooster (you), dog (xu), and pig (hai). Then the twelve year cycle starts over again with the rat. A yin and yang symbol is often located in the center of the calendar to represent the harmony of opposites.

In Chinese culture the date of one's birth is not as important as the year in which one is born. Everyone, no matter which month they were born, turns another day older on the seventh day of the New Year's Celebration. In China, this day is called the People's Day or the Day of Man.

### **Activity Instructions**

1. Direct students to use the Chinese calendar to find out which animal represents the year of their birth
2. Discuss the attributes of each of the animals in the Chinese calendar
  - Rat – charming, creative, ambitious, friendly
  - Ox – steadfast, loyal, dependable, honest, strong
  - Tiger – brave, warm, impetuous, sincere
  - Rabbit – aloof, shy, humble, quiet
  - Dragon – flamboyant, imaginative, strong, decisive
  - Snake – restrained, subtle, tricky
  - Horse – competitive, cheerful, talented, impatient
  - Sheep – affectionate, trusting, artist, complacent
  - Monkey – humorous, inventive, mischievous
  - Rooster – determined, proud, confident
  - Dog – loyal, trustworthy, likeable, sympathetic
  - Pig – industrious, hardworking, caring
3. Direct students to list three characteristics that describe their personality on a separate piece of paper. Then have the students choose an animal that they think embodies those traits and draw a picture of it. Note: students can also choose to create a symbol that represents the animal of their choice.

Rat

charming, creative, ambitious, friendly

Ox

steadfast, loyal, dependable, honest, strong

Tiger

brave, warm, impetuous, sincere

Rabbit

aloof, shy, humble, quiet

Dragon

flamboyant, imaginative, strong, decisive

Snake

restrained, subtle, tricky

Horse

competitive, cheerful, talented, impatient

Sheep

affectionate, trusting, artistic, complacent

Monkey

humorous, inventive, mischievous

Rooster

determined, proud, confident

Dog

loyal, trustworthy, likeable, sympathetic

Pig

industrious, hardworking, caring

## **Timeline**

### *Chinese in the United States and the East Bay*

#### **1830s**

Chinese at work in the sugarcane fields in Hawaii

#### **1848**

With the discovery of gold in California, Chinese men begin coming in large numbers

#### **1850-1864**

Taiping Rebellion – 20 million die and hundreds of thousands flee

#### **1850-1860**

Over 60,000 Chinese come to California

#### **c. 1850**

Foreign Miner's Tax

Any non-citizen had to have a license to mine gold (Chinese could not become U.S. citizens)

#### **1855**

Immigrant Tax

To discourage those who can't become citizens from immigrating to U.S.

#### **1860**

Eden Township census counts 2 Chinese

#### **1865**

Central Pacific Railroad recruits Chinese laborers

#### **1868**

Burlingame Treaty between China and US allows immigration between the two countries causes a wave of migration to US larger than during the gold rush

#### **1869**

Completion of Transcontinental Railroad – 11,000 Chinese completing the span between Sacramento and Promontory Point, Utah (at least 2,000 died)

### **1870**

Foreign Miner's Tax repealed

### **1870s**

Due to threats and violence directed at them, Chinese living in small towns and rural areas begin to relocate to Chinatowns in big cities

### **1874-1875**

Chinese recruited to help construct Chabot Dam at the San Leandro Reservoir (today known as Lake Chabot)

### **1877**

*May 19 – Hayward Weekly Review* states “Chinamen arriving to work in the currants”

*August 18* – Chinese were picking cucumbers for Graham

### **1879**

New California Constitution stated that only white or African Americans could own land

*Hayward's Journal* reports on a Chinese New Year celebration

### **1880**

Act Relating to Fishing in the Waters of this State – Non-citizens not allowed to fish

California's second constitution prevents whites from marrying non-whites

Chinese population in California is 100,000

### **1882**

Chinese Exclusion Act denies Chinese from coming to America, merchants, diplomats, and students are exceptions (renewed every ten years until 1902 when it was given no end date, repealed in 1943)

**1889**

Explosion at Chabot Dam kills Ah Bing (41), Kim Yuen (29), Toy Sing (31), and Lock Sing (33)

**1890**

Ratio of Chinese men to women – 27:1 due to mainly male immigration

**1891**

Population of the Eden Township included 538 Chinese (7% of total) and 4 Chinese students registered in school

**1898**

Children of Chinese descent who are born in U.S. are legal citizens

**1906**

San Francisco earthquake destroys records, including birth records of Chinese who could then claim to be American born

**1909**

Angel Island Immigration Station established to question Chinese immigrant's claims of relation to American Chinese

**1911**

Manchu government overthrown in China, Chinese men cut of their queues

**1924**

Immigration Act prevents Chinese families from coming to U.S.

**1937**

Japan invades China

**1941**

United States enters World War II allying with China

**1943**

President Roosevelt repeals the Chinese Exclusion Act, granting naturalization rights to Chinese and allowing small number of people to immigrate

**1940s**

Ratio of Chinese men to women – 3:1

**1949**

China becomes a communist nation and Taiwan declares independence,  
Chinese political refugees allowed into U.S.

**1965**

Immigration law abolishes country of origin as a basis for immigration quotas

## Storybook Summary

### *Coolies*

By Yin, Illustrated by Chris Soentpiet  
Puffin Books, 2001

The book *Coolies* tells the story of the building of the Transcontinental Railroad through the experiences of two Chinese laborers. The book begins in modern times as a young boy and his Paw Paw (grandmother) prepare to celebrate the Ching Ming Festival. This is a time to honor ancestors and so the grandmother tells the boy about her great grandfather who came to work in the United States.

Through vivid illustrations and a rich narrative the reader takes the journey from the poor Chinese region of Canton, across the Pacific in a cramped boat, to Sacramento where the work begins. *Coolies* accounts the work, camp life, men's attention to their traditions, and as "coolies," the worker's struggles with prejudice and harsh conditions. The story sees the completion of the railroad and the men settling into new jobs in San Francisco. Eventually they earn enough money to send for their families back home.

### ***Discussion Topics***

- Similarities between the characters in the story book and Li Hong's story
- Reasons that people leave their homes and move to a new place
- The importance of the Chinese in the building of the western United States
- Struggles faced by immigrants