



Culture Notes

Bridge Across the Sky

by Freedom Ng

Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2024

2024 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature

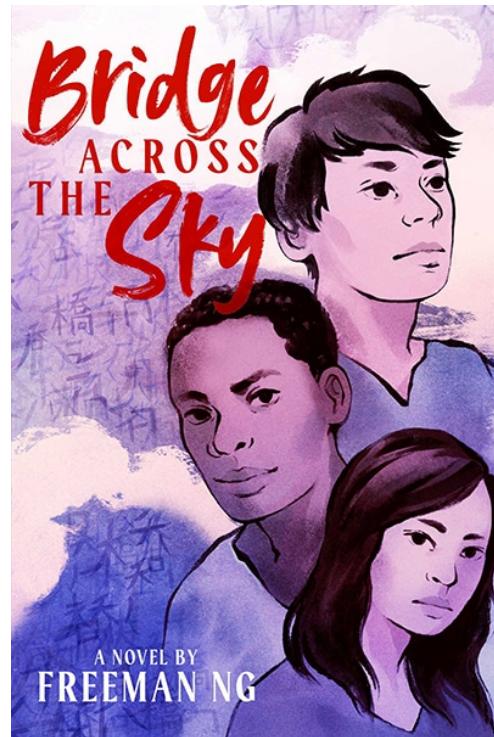
Fiction, set in the United States

Bridge Across the Sky is a novel written in free verse by Freedom Ng to portray one young Chinese immigrant's experiences at the U.S. Immigration Station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. This station was built to resemble the contemporaneous Ellis Island in New York Harbor; however, its focus was on the detention of certain categories of immigrants, notably from China, rather than on their routine inspection and processing.

While the story takes place over a period of half a year during 1924, the station on Angel Island remained in operation from 1910 to 1940. The protagonist—Soo Tai Go—and others like him were held in prison-like conditions at the station. The novel effectively portrays the claustrophobic atmosphere that prevailed.

Most of the Chinese immigrants had untrue "paper stories" about themselves and their relationships to particular ethnic Chinese individuals in the United States. The historical reasons for this are slightly complex, involving three special circumstances. First, in the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of Chinese had emigrated from a region of Southeast China to take part in the California Gold Rush (1850s) and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad (later 1860s). As Chinese continued to immigrate, a powerful movement arose against them on the U.S. West Coast, leading to the passage in Congress of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This unprecedented law, which remained in force until 1943, prohibited the immigration of additional Chinese laborers to the United States.

Second, prior to the Exclusion Act, Chinese immigrants, as non-whites, were already prohibited from becoming U.S. citizens. However, the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1868) mandated birthright citizenship, meaning that the





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children of immigrants of any ethnic background were automatically citizens if born within the United States. This led the U.S. government to collect detailed information regarding the circumstances of Chinese immigrants, including when and where their children were born.

However, many of these records—like other vital statistics for area citizens—were destroyed during the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Accordingly, the third circumstance is that certain immigrants from Southeast China began to claim that they were the children of Chinese couples residing in the United States. Since the government lacked records to prove or disprove these claims, the Bureau of Immigration (a forerunner to today's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) conducted detailed interrogations of these “paper sons” and their claimed relatives to ensure that their stories were consistent. These prospective immigrants were detained on Angel Island while they and their alleged relatives were interrogated. Most immigrants were eventually “landed”—permitted to enter the United States.

In sum, Chinese Exclusion, birthright citizenship, and the San Francisco earthquake jointly prepared the stage for this tale set on Angel Island. Soo Tai Go (paper name “Lee Yip Jing”) arrives with his father and grandfather in early 1924. His mother had insisted on teaching him English, which means that he can communicate with an African American kitchen worker. This figure—John Brown Boucher—agrees to transmit notes to a half-Chinese, half-Japanese young woman in the women’s quarters.

The story is complex and dramatic, with the positive ending that Soo Tai Go and his father will be “landed”—permitted entry. It presents the harsh U.S. immigration policies of the time as part of a larger racism that had also impacted other ethnicities such as African Americans and Native Americans. At the same time, the United States also comes across as an appealing “bigger world” (p. 78) relative to the districts of Southeast China—a rural area near the mouth of the Pearl River that abutted Hong Kong and Macao—from which the detainees emigrated.

The author of *Bridge Across the Sky* is a poet, and poetry is central to this book, even the source of its title. The text features poems by detainees (historically, over 200



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Chinese poems have been found on the walls of the detention barracks), by Tai Go, by Yukiko (the half-Japanese woman), and by Boucher. The quoted poems by detainees are authentic, while those by Tai Go, Yukiko, and Boucher—all fictional characters—help to drive the story forward.

Collectively, the detainees' poems are now famous as the earliest literary expressions of Chinese immigrants to the United States. Although the immigrants usually had only an elementary school education, they wrote their poems in classical form. This form featured four or eight lines per poem and five or seven characters per line. Typically, the ends of even-numbered lines would rhyme. Some poems that were scratched onto the walls included historical or literary allusions that further displayed the knowledge level of their authors.

As noted, Yukiko, Tai Go's prospective love interest, included poems in her letters. While not identified as such in the text, these poems are haiku: short Japanese poems that subtly express emotions while overtly concentrating on natural phenomena. Traditionally, a haiku poem has five syllables in their first line, seven in its second, and five in its third and final line. Haiku in English, such as the examples in the book, don't always conform strictly to this pattern. However, they too are short and display a sensitivity to nature.

Tai Go's grandfather had two obsessions: the wall poems and the game Go (*weiqi* in Chinese) originating in ancient China. Grandfather and grandson play the game frequently. Tai Go's changing approach to it becomes a metaphor for his increasing assertiveness in the face of challenges. The game itself involves a grid-covered board on which two players face off, one with white chips and one with black. Each player places a single chip on the board each time it is their turn. The objective is to surround the opponent's chips with one's own, step-by-step, thus controlling ever greater territory on the board and earning more points. As a message about both the game and life at large, Tai Go's grandfather reminds him to attack relentlessly, but always from positions of strength: "only / surrounded groups / can be killed" (p. 295).



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Part of the screening process for prospective Chinese immigrants featured intensive medical exams that they found quite humiliating. Tai Go contrasts these exams—which included nudity before others, needle injections, and stool samples—with the gentler approach of Traditional Chinese Medicine (often called TCM in English writing). The latter would measure a patient's heartbeat through a touch on the wrist, drawing many diagnostic conclusions from this single act. TCM would also pay substantial attention to the patient's eating habits and defecation patterns (tactfully). Here, as elsewhere, the protagonist highlights the contrasting approaches of East Asia and the modern West.

Note that while the text does not focus on introducing elements for their shock value, it includes swear words and references to the protagonist's erections in bed. There is also focused discussion of one detainee's suicide, reflecting the fact that a few detainees rejected for entry into the United States ended their own lives at the immigration station.

Regarding pronunciation: The author's family name is "Ng," pronounced like the diphthong that ends English words like "shopping" and "hiking." This sound appears in the Cantonese dialect of Chinese, spoken in Guangdong Province in Southeast China. It does not form a part of the standard (Mandarin) Chinese dialect.

While published in 2024, *Bridge Across the Sky* already has heightened relevance today in the light of changes imposed to U.S. immigration policies in 2025.

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2025