The Wongs are a Chinese immigrant family that moved to New York City in 1965. At this time, many people from China began to move to the city, and a community started to form in Chinatown. The Wongs were able to maintain their language and culture by going to Chinese School and by celebrating holidays such as the Mid-Autumn Harvest Festival. Mrs. Wong also found community at work, in the garment factories of Chinatown, where she could speak her language, eat familiar food, and bring her children when she needed help with childcare. Through joining the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Mrs. Wong was able to help provide for her family.

In this oral history clip, Alison talks about popular culture and language. She mentions feeling part of a larger group by watching the same TV shows as her friends and peers. She also mentions the difficulty of not understanding the language, and how she would need to translate for her mother.

- What TV shows or videos do you watch that make you feel part of a larger group?
- Why might it be difficult to feel part of a group if you can’t speak the language?
- How might it feel for Alison to have to translate for her mother? Besides TV, what else might she need to translate for Mrs. Wong?
## Oral History: Kevin Discusses His Name

**Transcript**

In this oral history clip, Kevin talks about an instance in which he was made to feel different, or “other.” When he was in elementary school, a teacher set him aside and advised him to pick an “English” name so that his life would be easier. Named Yat Chung as a baby by Mr. and Mrs. Wong, he chose the name Kevin.

**Questions for Student Exploration**

- Kevin’s teacher says that picking an English name would be “easier for people.” For whom will an English name be easier?
- How do you think Mr. and Mrs. Wong may have felt when their son came home with a new, English name?
- What is the meaning behind your name? Is your name important to you?

## Video: 1980s Garment Factory Footage

This is primary source footage filming the daily operations of a 1980s Chinatown garment factory. This source allows students to hear the sounds of sewing machines and chatter that would have permeated through these factories. They can see all the people and different tasks that go into making a garment, and especially see the hard work in action.

**Questions for Student Exploration**

- Use your five senses: what might you see, smell, hear, feel, and taste in this factory?
- Why do you think there were some children in the factory?
- Can you identify some of the jobs that these workers were doing throughout the video?

## Reading Activities

**Comprehension Questions**

- What year did Mrs. Wong immigrate?
- Who did Mrs. Wong immigrate with to the United States?
- What was the important item Yat Ping carried to the United States?
- Why was it difficult for Chinese families to come to the United States before the time the Wong family came?
- Where did Mr. Wong work when the family moved to 103 Orchard Street?
- Where did the Wong children go to school?
- How did Yat Ping help her mother when she was 12 years old?
**READING ACTIVITIES**

**Comprehension Questions**
- Where did Mrs. Wong start to work after Kevin was born?
- What was the organization Mrs. Wong joined to help make her job safe and fair?
- What did Mrs. Wong do with the money she saved from working in the Garment industry?

**Your Turn / Thinking Questions**
- Why do you think Mrs. Wong brought moon cakes even though she had so much to carry? Why was it so important for Yat Ping to keep the moon cakes?
- What might have been hard about being some of the first Chinese immigrants to live in a neighborhood? What would make it easier for you to adjust to life in this new place?
- How did the Wong children experience American culture? How did they experience Chinese culture?
- How was working in the Garment factory difficult for workers and how was it helpful?

**ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE**
- Do you have any holiday traditions from your culture or heritage?

**WRITING ACTIVITIES**

1. Choose one of the members of the Wong family and create a comic strip that tells us a story about that person. The comic strip should have 4–6 drawings with speech bubbles in each one. You could tell the story of: Yat Ping carrying the moon cakes to New York, Alison watching TV and translating for her mother, Kevin’s story of changing his name or Mrs. Wong’s first day at the Garment Shop. Think about the following details for your comic strip.
   - What is the setting?
   - What are some details in the setting you could draw to help your reader understand the scene or character?
   - How does your main character feel and how can you show it?

2. How did the Wong family participate in both American culture and Chinese culture? In your answer, choose two different examples and use evidence from the text and primary sources.
# GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BURDEN</td>
<td>(v) to be overwhelmed by carrying heavy objects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL</td>
<td>(n) a harvest celebration in China and Vietnam that celebrates family,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>friends, and giving thanks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCARD</td>
<td>(v) to throw out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSIST</td>
<td>(v) to strongly advise or demand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT</td>
<td>(n) an immigration law from 1882 that fully excluded Chinese people from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>immigrating to or getting citizenship in the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAN</td>
<td>(v) to exclude, prohibit, or forbid someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HART CELLAR ACT</td>
<td>(n) an immigration law that ended a lot of strong restrictions so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that more people from many different countries could come to the United</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOCIALIZE</td>
<td>(v) to meet, play, and talk to friends and neighbors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETHNICALLY DIVERSE</td>
<td>(adj) a mixture of people from a lot of different cultures, religions,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and races.</td>
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<tr>
<td>TRANSLATE</td>
<td>(v) to help people who speak different languages understand each other.</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOURIST ATTRACTION</td>
<td>(n) a place of visual, historical, or cultural importance that people</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>visit on vacation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHRISTIANITY</td>
<td>(n) a religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GARMENT INDUSTRY</td>
<td>(n) any work that includes making clothes and other fashion items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GARMENT FACTORY</td>
<td>(n) a space with many people who work together to make clothes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNION</td>
<td>(n) a group of people that come together for a common purpose to better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>their conditions at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADVOCATE</td>
<td>(v) to support and work towards improvement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FAMILY ARTICLE

THE STORY

THE WONGS

Getting Here

Mrs. Wong was from Southern China. When she was a child, she went to school, but also helped on her family farm growing rice, picking peanuts, and carrying water. When she grew up, she got married and had 2 daughters: Yat Ping and Yat Fong, who also went by the name Alison. In 1965, when Yat Ping was 7 and Alison was a baby, they immigrated to New York City to join Mr. Wong. Mrs. Wong said that the family immigrated to find better work and better opportunities for their children.

Mrs. Wong told a story about immigrating from China to the United States in 1965. At the airport in China, she was burdened with too many things to carry. She had suitcases, a rice cooker, a box of moon cakes, and baby Alison to carry. Moon cakes are small, decorated cakes eaten during the Chinese mid-autumn festival. Mrs. Wong had so much to carry that she thought it was best to discard of the moon cakes. However, 7-year old Yat Ping insisted that her mother not throw the moon cakes away, and she decided to carry the moon cakes to the United States herself.

YOUR TURN

Why do you think Mrs. Wong brought moon cakes even though she had so much to carry? Why was it so important to Yat Ping to keep the moon cakes?
Do you have any holiday traditions from your culture or heritage?

Getting Started

The Wong family came to the United States when the Chinese community in New York City was starting to grow. The Wong family came in 1965, but eighty years earlier a law called the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882. This law banned almost all Chinese people from immigrating to the United States. The small number of Chinese people who were able to immigrate were mostly men, and they were not able to bring their families or even become citizens. Mrs. Wong came to the United States in the same year a new law was passed — the Hart Cellar Act. This law allowed for increased Asian immigration. Because of this new immigration law, New York City’s Chinatown became the largest Chinatown in the United States!

YOUR TURN

What might have been hard about being some of the first Chinese immigrants to live in a neighborhood? What would make it easier for you to adjust to life in this new place?
The Wong family moved into their apartment on 103 Orchard Street three years after Mrs. Wong arrived. By this time, Yat Ping was 10, Alison was 3, and there was a new baby named Toni. The three girls would share the same bedroom and grow up in this apartment.

When the children were young, Mr. Wong worked at a restaurant during the evening, a laundromat at night, and had to sleep during the day. Mrs. Wong took care of the children during the day. She took them to nearby Seward Park and socialized with another mother in the building while the children played.

In the Lower East Side, the Wongs had neighbors with many different cultures and religions. Many Jewish families had been living in the neighborhood since the 1880s, and a number of Puerto Rican families were moving in. All the children attended school at P.S. 42, and remembered an ethnically diverse mix of students who had different backgrounds and spoke different languages. Now that immigration from China was easier, many more Chinese families began to move into the neighborhood as well.

Creating a Life in the United States as a Family

In 1970, Yat Chung was born. Yat Chung also went by the name Kevin. Alison, Toni, and Kevin remembered that their older sister, Yat Ping, did a lot to help take care of them. Yat Ping also helped her mother by reading signs in English, and translating into Chinese for her when they went shopping, to the bank, or to the doctor’s office.

All of the children attended Chinese school after school and on the weekends to learn about Chinese language and culture. They also grew up learning what it meant to be American. They took trips together as a family to tourist attractions like Niagara Falls in upstate New York, and they sat on Santa Claus’ lap for photos during the Christmas season. Kevin loved to read comic books, and Alison watched the popular American TV shows of the time. Although her mother couldn’t understand the shows herself, Alison told her in Chinese what they were about.

They practiced Christianity, and celebrated Christmas and Easter. They also celebrated Lunar New Year, the Mid-Autumn Harvest Festival, and other holidays from the Chinese tradition.
While the family made efforts to do what they saw many Americans around them doing, the children also received messages about how some people saw them as different. In the (sidebar) clip Kevin talks about how he was given an American name in school.

**YOUR TURN** How did the Wong children experience American culture? How did they experience Chinese culture?

**Finding Community**

After Kevin was born and Mrs. Wong had been in the United States for 5 years, the children’s grandparents moved to New York, joining the family to help with childcare. Mrs. Wong started to work in the garment industry, sewing clothing as many other people had done on the Lower East Side for generations. She worked in a garment factory for over 30 years. She remembers that on her first day of work she sat at a big, heavy, fast-moving sewing machine and earned about $3 for a day of work. It was a start.

The work of the factory was difficult in many ways. The women worked long hours with short and few breaks in a factory that could get hot. The machines were loud and the clothes created dust and smells that made it difficult to breathe. Mrs. Wong once even caught her finger in the needle of the sewing machine.

While it was hard, there were some aspects of the work that were helpful to the family. Mrs. Wong joined an organization called a union that helped to make the workplace safer and fairer. The union would advocate for the workers, limiting the number of hours they could work and making sure they were paid a fair wage. The union helped Mrs. Wong get healthcare for the family, attend English classes, and also helped her make friends with other people in the neighborhood through union community events.

At the factory, Mrs. Wong built friendships with many of the other women she worked with. They shared meals together, had their children play together when they had to bring them to work or outside of work, and could even help each other in times of need. Though the work was hard, the hours were long, and the pay was low, Mrs. Wong was able to save some of the money she earned. Because of this, Yat Ping, Alison, Toni, and Kevin were all able to go to college.

**YOUR TURN** How was working in the Garment factory difficult for workers and how was it helpful?
In this oral history clip, Alison talks about popular culture and language. She says she felt part of a larger group by watching the same TV shows as her friends. Alison would also translate the shows for her mother.

**Alison Wong Talks About Watching TV**

> When I wasn’t doing homework, I would watch TV. I remember watching the shows of Charlie’s Angels, Bionic Woman, Fantasy Island, Love Boat. It was that incredible cultural moment that half of America was watching the shows every week. And my mom remembered those shows, she would ask me what it is, and we’ll tell them in Chinese. She may not understand the whole thing, but if I explain things in Chinese, she’ll get the major premise of the show. And she’ll remember the images.
In this oral history clip, Kevin talks about a time when he was made to feel different, or “other.” When he was in elementary school, a teacher told him to pick out an “English” name so that his life would be easier. As a baby, he was named Yat Chung, but he chose the name Kevin.

Kevin Wong Shares the Story of His Name

I think it was around the 5th Grade, the 4th or 5th Grade, that we had one session, one recess session, where a homeroom teacher told us that it would be much easier if we had a different, you know, more of an English first name, it will be easier for people, when you go to school, to next level school or go to work. So one of the things was that they sat us down saying, ‘so you have some time in this period to figure out what do you want to use for your English name.’ It wasn’t uncommon for that to happen because I think a lot of my friends had English names already, so they didn’t really have to worry about this, but there were some of us that were still going by our Chinese names. My Chinese name was Yat Chung, and I picked Kevin. I just saw it on the list, and I said ‘Okay.’
VIDEO

This is video of a 1980s Chinatown garment factory. We can hear the sounds of sewing machines and we can see all the people and different tasks that go into making clothes.

NOTE The link will open a new webpage in the default browser.
Mrs. Wong and Yat Ping Wong in China, 1965.
The Wong children's bedroom. Yat Ping, Alison and Toni shared this room.
Mrs. Wong, Yat Ping, and Kevin visiting Niagra Falls.
Yat Ping, Kevin, and Alison Wong with Santa Clause.
Kevin in the family’s living room.
Mrs. Wong and Kevin at Kevin’s graduation from college.