

ISLAND

*Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants
on Angel Island 1910-1940*

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Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, Judy Yung

*Dedicated to the Pioneers
Who Passed Through Angel Island*

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*Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants
on Angel Island
1910-1940*

BY

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(History of Chinese Detained on Island)

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INTRODUCTION

Angel Island, now an idyllic state park out in San Francisco Bay not far from Alcatraz, was the point of entry for the majority of the approximately 175,000 Chinese immigrants who came to America between 1910 and 1940. Modeled after New York's Ellis Island, the site was used as the immigration detention headquarters for Chinese awaiting jurisdiction on the outcomes of medical examinations and immigration papers. It was also the holding ground for deportees awaiting transportation back to the motherland. The ordeal of immigration and detention left an indelible mark in the minds of many Chinese, a number of whom wrote poetry on the barrack walls, recording the impressions of their voyage to America, their longing for families back home, and their outrage and humiliation at the treatment America accorded them.

When the center's doors shut in 1940, one of the most bitter chapters in the history of Chinese immigration to America came to a close. The poems expressing the thoughts of the Chinese immigrants were locked behind those doors and soon forgotten. Those poems have been resurrected and preserved in this book. It was by accident that they have survived. The three of us, offspring of Angel Island inmates, plunged into the project of translation and historical documentation as a personal hobby which later evolved into this book. The task to preserve the words and history of these Chinese immigrants was made more

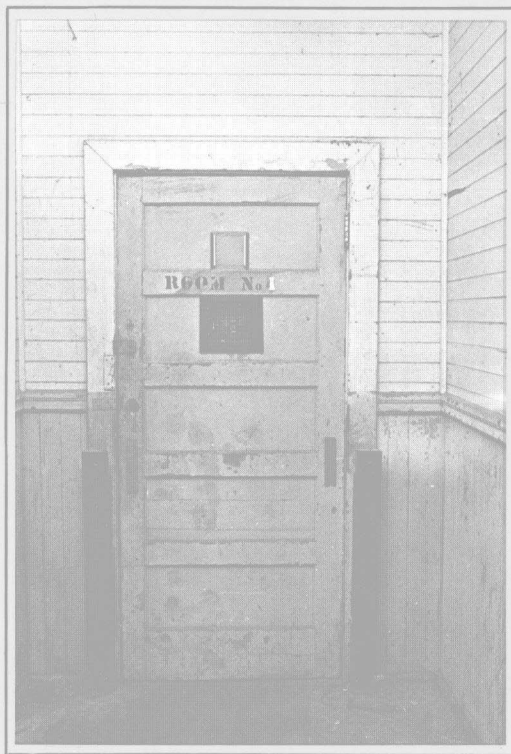
urgent by the fact that most of these old-timers are now elderly and many already have died.

In an effort to discover and document life at the Angel Island Immigration Station, 39 persons—eight women and 31 men,—have been interviewed. Of them, 32 had been detainees at the station. The remainder had visited or worked there. As a whole, the former detainees hesitated to reveal an unpleasant past they preferred left forgotten. It was only after a promise of anonymity that they agreed to be interviewed for this book. Piecing together their recorded testimonies, we can glimpse into their lives on the island, and better understand their motivations for journeying to *Gam Saan*, the Golden Mountain, and their impressions of that immigration experience.

Remarkably enough, detailed experiences occurring 40 to 70 years past ring with a surprising accuracy and clarity. In some cases, as must be expected, generalized descriptions of people and events admittedly are blurred or dulled by the lapse in time. We must bear in mind also the monolingual perspective of the immigrant at the time of detainment. Because of the communication block between the detainees and the immigration authorities, occasional actions and events were not surprisingly misconstrued. But overall, the oral history of the detainees gives a fairly consistent and accurate picture of the immigrants' daily life on Angel Island.

The Chinese detention barrack on Angel Island, a two-story wood building

located on a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay, stood abandoned for more than two decades until it was finally marked by the government for destruction. In 1970, park ranger Alexander Weiss noticed characters inscribed on



A door into imprisonment.

the walls inside and concluded they were writings left by Chinese immigrants once detained there for questioning. Weiss informed his superiors but they did not share his enthusiasm or belief in the significance of the calligraphy on the walls. Weiss contacted Dr. George Araki of San Francisco State University,

who along with San Francisco photographer Mak Takahashi went out to the island and photographed practically every inch of the barrack walls that bore writing, most of which was poetry. Their discovery soon sparked enough local Asian American community interest to lobby for its preservation, and in 1976 the Legislature appropriated \$250,000 for the preservation of the building.

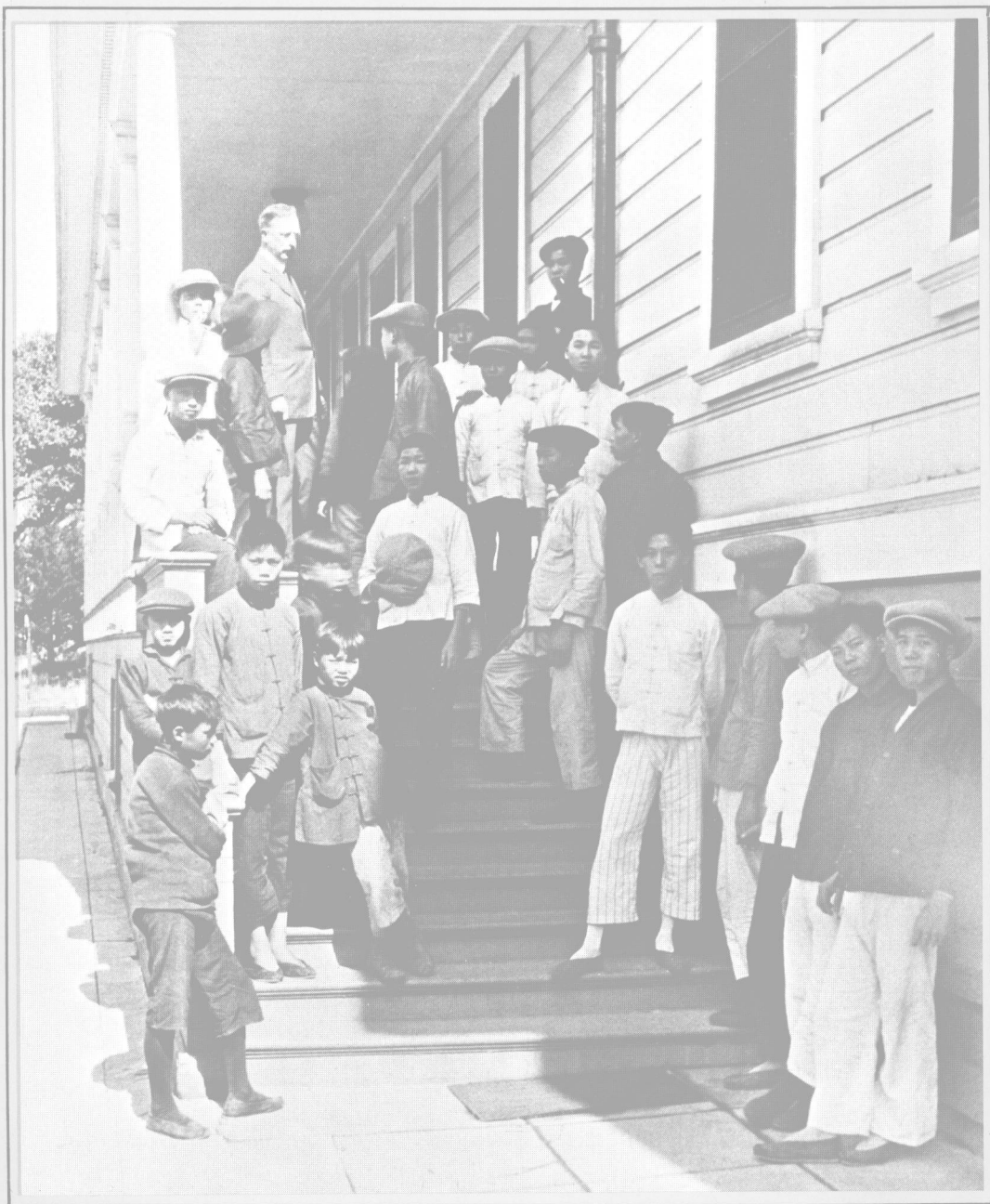
The Chinese began emigrating to America in large numbers during the California Gold Rush. Political chaos and economic hardships at home forced them to venture overseas to seek a better livelihood. From the beginning, they were mistreated. Discrimination was the norm. Forced from the rich gold fields to lean claims disdained by white miners, the Chinese worked hard to eke out a living. In 1852, a Foreign Miner's Tax, which accounted for more than half of the tax revenue collected in California between 1850 and 1870, was imposed on Chinese miners.

Although the Chinese were not welcomed, their contributions to America were important. The Chinese found work in many fields. They were instrumental in building the transcontinental railroads, reclaiming swamplands in California's Sacramento-San Joaquin River delta area, developing the shrimp and abalone fisheries, the opulent Napa-Sonoma vineyards, new strains of fruit, and providing needed labor for California's growing agriculture and light industries. Nonethe-

less, the Chinese continued to be the target of racist laws.

San Francisco passed ordinances such as the Cubic Air Ordinance in 1870, forbidding Chinese to rent rooms with fewer than 500 cubic feet of air per person (for economic reasons most Chinese shared small tenement rooms); the Sidewalk Ordinance in 1870, prohibiting Chinese from using poles to carry laundry loads on the sidewalk; and the Queue Ordinance in 1873, requiring Chinese prisoners to cut their hair short, a disgrace to Chinese nationals in those days. On occasion, when hatred flared, bloodthirsty mobs would storm the Chinese settlements, looting, lynching, burning, and driving the Chinese out. So cruelly did America treat them that it caused humorist Mark Twain to wince and write wryly of the Chinese, "They are a harmless race when white men either let them alone or treat them no worse than dogs."

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the inevitable culmination of a series of oppressive anti-Chinese laws and violent physical assaults upon the Chinese. Demagogic politicians and opportunistic labor leaders led the battle for its passage, using the Chinese as a scapegoat for high unemployment during the post-Civil War recession. They stirred the working class into believing that the Chinese were undesirable aliens who deprived whites of jobs. The visible presence of the Chinese and their willingness to take on low-paying menial jobs disdained by whites made them an easy object of scorn.



Male detainees on hospital steps.

The Exclusion Act of 1882 heralded a change in the nation's immigration pattern. Free and unrestricted immigration was replaced by restrictions and racism. For the first time in American history, members of a specific ethnic group were refused entry and admittance to the naturalization process. Only government officials, merchants, students, teachers, visitors, as well as those claiming U.S. citizenship were admitted. The Exclusion Act was revised several more times, closing loopholes and becoming stricter in its provisions, so that by the turn of the century, the restriction process was consciously and actively moving toward total exclusion.

However, during these same years life in China was becoming increasingly difficult as China's economy continued to decline under the pressures exerted by Western imperialism. Many were driven abroad to seek better living conditions. Despite the unfriendly environment in the United States, the Chinese were willing to sacrifice lives' savings and risk heavy debts to chance a better life in America. Some traveled to Canada, Mexico, or the Caribbean Islands, where they were smuggled into the United States. Others took advantage of legal loopholes, using credentials of questionable validity.

U.S. immigration officials reacted with harsh measures in order to suppress illegal entries. They frequently swept through Chinese establishments, ensnaring alleged illegal immigrants. Between 1901 and 1910, deportations averaged

560 per year. (It is said that the common sight of khaki-clad immigration officials arresting Chinese gave rise to the Cantonese term, *luk yi*, or "green clothesman," which eventually became the Chinese American colloquial name for "police officer.") At ports of entry, immigration inspectors held all Chinese claims for right of admission suspect until their identities could be verified through cross-examinations. Designed to exclude rather than to admit, routine interrogations of new Chinese arrivals were intensive and detailed.

The Chinese viewed the exclusion laws and regulations as unfair and discriminatory and termed the statutes *keli*, meaning "tyrannical laws." They addressed numerous complaints to the United States government and to Chinese diplomats stationed in this country, objecting to the harsh treatment of the Chinese in general and protesting in particular the suspicious and discourteous attitude immigration officials evidenced toward members of the exempt classes. To protest the immigration procedures, Chinese merchants organized a boycott of American goods which started in Shanghai in 1905 and spread to Canton and other Chinese cities as well as many overseas Chinese communities. Sustained several months, the boycott forced the United States to relax some of its more objectionable regulations. The negative attitude among immigration authorities toward Chinese immigration, however, remained unchanged.



The immigrants' first view of Angel Island barracks.

Until 1910, Chinese ship passengers arriving at San Francisco were detained in a two-story shed at the Pacific Mail Steamship Company wharf (known to the Cantonese Chinese immigrants as *muk uk* or "wooden house") until immigration inspectors could examine them and determine the validity of their claims. As many as 400 to 500 people were crammed into the facility at one time. Chinese community leaders in Chinatown, alarmed at the unsafe and unsanitary conditions of the structure, complained frequently to U.S. officials. Upon investigation, the Immigration Department did indeed find support for the complaints and recommended that funds

be appropriated to erect an immigration station on Angel Island to accommodate aliens, chiefly Chinese and other Asians. The subsequent decision to relocate the station to Angel Island was not altogether humanitarian. Officials also felt that the island location would effectively prevent Chinese immigrants from communicating with Chinese on the outside and would isolate immigrants with allegedly "communicable diseases prevalent among aliens from oriental countries." Also, the station, like Alcatraz prison, would be escape-proof.

On January 21, 1910, the Angel Island station officially opened, despite complaints by leaders from San Francisco's

Chinatown that its location was inconvenient for Chinese witnesses. The government quickly discovered that the insular location of the station was unsatisfactory, although they came to the conclusion for different reasons. A few months after the facility opened, acting Commissioner Luther Steward submitted reports to the Commissioner General of Immigration in Washington, D.C., highly critical of the many physical and sanitary drawbacks in the facility's design. In 1920, Immigration Commissioner Edward White declared that the facility's structures were virtual tinder boxes, and he proposed removing the station to the mainland to cut expenses. By 1922, both Assistant Secretary of Labor Edward J. Henning and Commissioner General of Immigration W.W. Husband agreed and Husband declared that the island facilities were filthy and unfit for habitation. But it was not until 1940, when a fire destroyed the administration building, that the government finally abandoned the immigration station. On November 5, the last group of Angel Island detainees, numbering 125 Chinese men and 19 women, was transferred to temporary quarters at 801 Silver Avenue in San Francisco.

After the closing of the immigration station during World War II, Congress, in an attempt to buttress Chinese resistance to Japan on the Chinese mainland and to minimize the effects of the Japanese propaganda attacking American racist policies, repealed the exclusion acts of 1943 and assigned an annual token immigration quota of 105 to the Chinese. Chinese arrivals, however, were

still detained to determine the validity of their applications for admission. After being relocated to Sharp Park, California, in the spring of 1942, the detention quarters were moved once again in 1944 into the Appraiser's Building at 630 Sansome Street near San Francisco's waterfront. The detainment of Chinese to determine admission eligibility was finally stopped in the early 1950s when consular officials, responsible for the issuance of visas at the port of embarkation, also assumed the primary responsibility of determining the validity of an applicant's claim by means of submitted documents and interviews.

During the period when the Angel Island Immigration Station was active, immigration officials climbed aboard and inspected the passengers' documents each time a ship arrived in San Francisco. Those with satisfactory papers could go ashore, and the remainder were transferred to a small steamer and ferried to the island immigration station to await hearings on their applications for entry. Although a few whites and other Asians were held on occasion at the detention center, the majority of detainees were Chinese.

As soon as the ferry docked at Angel Island, whites were separated from other races, and Chinese were kept apart from Japanese and other Asians. Men and women, including husbands and wives, were separated and not allowed to see or communicate with each other again until they were admitted into the country.



Women's infirmary.

Children under age twelve or so were assigned to the care of their mothers. Most of the Chinese immigrants, however, were males in their teens or early twenties.

Soon after arrival, they were taken to the hospital for medical examinations. Because of poor health conditions in rural China, some immigrants were afflicted with parasitic diseases. The U.S. government classified certain of these ailments as loathsome and dangerously contagious and sought to use them as grounds to deny admission. Arrivals with trachoma were excluded in 1903. In 1910, government officials added to the list uncinariasis (hookworm) and filariasis and in 1917, clonorchiasis (liver fluke). Because these regulations primarily affected the Chinese, many con-

sidered them arbitrary barriers erected to thwart their entry. After considerable protests by Chinatown leaders, some patients were allowed to stay for medical treatment.

Chinese who passed the medical hurdle returned to their dormitories to await hearings on their applications. Men and women lived in separate sparsely furnished communal rooms provided with rows of single bunks arranged in two or three tiers. Privacy was minimal. Men were kept on the second floor of the detention barracks, which was surrounded by a fence to prevent escapes. The women, originally detained in the same building, were moved to the second story of the administration building in the 1920s.

Guards sat outside the dormitories' locked doors, and the Chinese were usually left alone. During the first year of operation, Tye Leung, a Chinese American from Donaldina Cameron's Presbyterian Mission Home in San Francisco, was hired as interpreter and assistant to the matrons, who were technically guards of the women detainees. In 1912, she married a fellow employee, immigration inspector Charles Frederick Schulze, and in the prevailing racist atmosphere of the times, she and her husband were soon forced to resign their positions.

At any one time between 200 and 300 males and 30 to 50 females were detained at Angel Island. Most were new arrivals, but some were returning residents with questionable documents. Also confined were earlier arrivals whose applications had been denied and who were waiting either decisions on their appeals or orders for their departure, Chinese who had been arrested and sentenced to be deported, and transients en route to and from countries neighboring the United States, especially Mexico and Cuba.

To prevent the smuggling of coaching information to detainees prior to interrogation, no inmate could receive outside visitors before his case had been judged. Authorities routinely inspected letters and gift packages to and from detainees for possible coaching messages.

Confined inside the dormitory, the immigrants languished on their bunks, spending their waking hours daydreaming or worrying about their futures. Some

passed the time gambling, but stakes were usually inconsequential because the inmates had little pocket money. The literate read Chinese newspapers sent from San Francisco and books brought from home as well as those left behind by others. By the late 1920s or early 1930s, a phonograph and Chinese opera records purchased by the detainees were also available for their amusement. Some women, on the other hand, passed the time sewing or knitting.

Separate small, fenced, outdoor recreation yards afforded the men and women sunlight and fresh air. Once a week they were escorted to a storehouse at the dock where they could select needed items from their baggage. Women and children were sometimes allowed to walk the grounds in a supervised group, a privilege denied the men.

Other than immigration officials, the outsider seen most often by the Chinese immigrants was Deaconess Katharine Maurer (1881-1962), who had been appointed in 1912 by the Women's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to do Chinese welfare work at the immigration station. Her work was also supported by funds and gifts from the Daughters of the American Revolution. The deaconess, who became known as the "Angel of Angel Island," helped detainees write letters, taught them English, and performed other small services, primarily for the women and children, to make detention life more bearable.