

FEATURE

A Treasure Book of Angel Island Poetry

Chinese calligraphy carved on its walls turned out to be more than 200 poems and has been published in a book titled *Island*.

By Foster Stockwell

In 1940 a fire shut down the immigration station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, ending one of the bitterest chapters in the history of the Chinese in America. Fortunately the detention building that once held thousands of Chinese immigrants awaiting decisions on their status was spared, but closed, and largely abandoned and forgotten.

It was not until 1970, when a man from the California Department of Parks and Recreation, entered the building and discovered, to his surprise, Chinese calligraphy carved all over its walls. On further investigation, this calligraphy turned out to be more than 200 poems, as well as graphic images and various inscriptions in several other languages. The poems, now translated, have been published by the University of Washington Press in a book titled *Island*.

Since the discovery of this calligraphy, the building on Angel Island has been designated a National Historic Site, and the state of California has appropriated funds for the preservation of the building and its poetry.

The Angel Island facility, often called the “Ellis Island of the West,” was opened on January 21, 1910. Its purpose was to process all immigrants arriving at various ports on the West Coast for entry onto the mainland. Such immigrants came from various countries, but those from China received the harshest treatment and longest detention at the facility. Many were deported back to China when they couldn’t prove a family relationship to one or another Chinese already living in America. Much of the time there were between two hundred and three hundred

males and thirty to fifty females being detained for interrogation at Angel Island.

From 1910 to 1940 the immigrant inspectors rejected 8,672 of the 95,687 Chinese applicants. Only one other immigrant group, South Asians (mainly Sikhs), had a higher rate of rejection than the Chinese. The Chinese applicants were asked two hundred to one thousand questions, and typical proceedings usually lasted two to three days. If witnesses had to be interviewed in distant cities, the interrogations would take much longer.

Because of the difficulties involved and the ever-present likelihood of rejection, the Chinese immigrants prepared themselves by memorizing information given to them and their witnesses by immigration “brokers” months before they even boarded a ship to come to America. The brokers had a lucrative business in preparing false papers that could be sold to prospective immigrants so that they could claim a family relationship to one of the U.S.-born Chinese. Because there were usually no documents to verify the claims of these “paper sons” and “paper daughters,” the scope and methods for examination of the Chinese detainees were different than that for other nationalities.

The Chinese held at Angel Island greatly resented their long confinement, particularly because they knew that immigrants from other countries were cleared for entry relatively early. The men and women lived in separate, sparsely furnished communal rooms filled with rows of double- and triple-decked metal bunks. They languished on these bunks worrying about the future. Some of the men were held there for more

than a year waiting for their interrogation process to be completed.

It was not until Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1965 that the last vestiges of racism against Chinese immigrants were removed and the processing of Chinese immigrants was put on a par with that of other nationalities. On the 130th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Congress passed a resolution “expressing regret” for the treatment accorded to Chinese immigrants over the years.

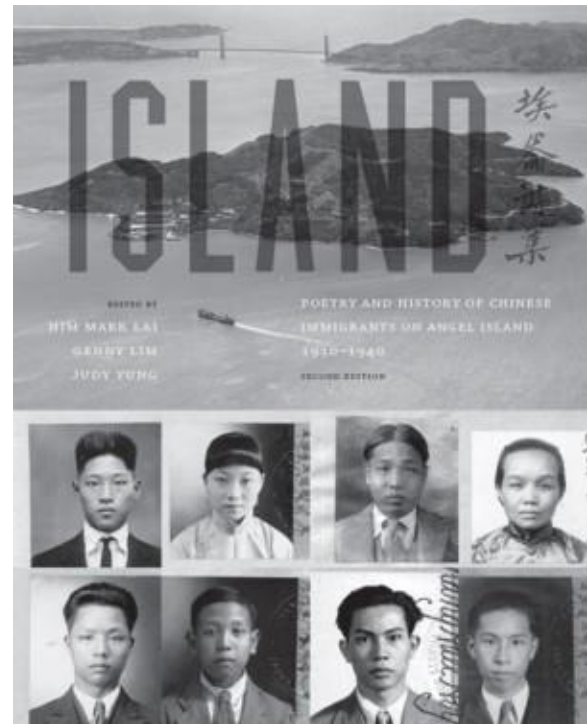
The poems found on the walls of the barracks represent the first literary body of work by Chinese in North America. But these are likely only part of the poems that were actually produced because the Angel Island authorities ordered that the walls be painted over when they found Chinese characters written all over them. After that, the poets carved their writings into the walls so that they could not be so easily removed.

The poets themselves were largely Cantonese villagers from the Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong Province. Their feelings of anger and frustration, homesickness and loneliness, hope and despair were carved onto the walls of the barracks. All of these poems are written in the classical style of Chinese poetry. 135 have been published in this book.

A typical example of these poems reads:

*Four days before the Qiqiao Festival,
I boarded the steamship for America.
Time flew like a shooting arrow.
Already, a cool Autumn has passed.
Counting on my fingers, several months
have elapsed.
Still I am at the beginning of the road.
I have yet to be interrogated.
My heart is nervous with anticipation.*

For each translated poem, there are the original Chinese characters printed on a facing page. A further feature that makes this book most valuable is the inclusion of 19 oral histories by some of the living detainees and their families.



This second edition is edited by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. An important historical document as well as a significant work of literature, this edition of Island includes a new historical introduction, 150 annotated poems in Chinese and English translation, extensive profiles of immigrants gleaned through oral histories, and dozens of new photographs from public archives and family albums.

All in all, this is an exquisite book, handsomely designed and illustrated. It should grace every fine library of books about the Chinese in America.

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Foster Stockwell grew up in China (12 years) first in Fujian Province and then in Szechuan Province (city of Chengdu) as the son of American missionaries.

He returned to the U.S. just before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. After completing college, became a writer and editor working for various magazine, newspaper, and book publishers. For 20 years he was a senior editor for World Book Encyclopedia in Chicago, and for 10 years the publishing director for China Books and Periodicals in San Francisco.

He has written six published books, two of which are about China (Religion in China Today, and Westerners in China) and has traveled to China more than 15 times over the past 25 years, working as a polisher and consultant for the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing. Now retired and living in Des Moines, Washington.