

FEATURE



Angel Island

A Dedication Ceremony

By Walter Ko

Angel Island Immigration Station is one of this country's most poignant and moving historic sites, located just off the shores of San Francisco.

Angel Island was a major port of entry to the U.S. for immigrants from the Pacific Rim between 1910 and 1940. It is estimated that more than 200,000 Chinese and 150,000 Japanese, among thousands of other immigrant populations, came through Angel Island Immigration Station, which was built in 1910. It was a detainment center for immigrating Chinese, who were subject to the discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the only U.S. immigration legislation excluding a specific ethnic group from entry into this country. Angel Island was used as the main Pacific Coast detention camp for prisoners of war during World War I and World War II.

The historical significance of Angel Island Immigration Station is most vividly expressed through poetry written on its walls. Over a thirty-year period, Chinese immigrants inscribed their hopes and fears on the walls of the detention barracks.

Along with writings in Japanese, Russian, Arabic, East Indian, German and English, these inscriptions provide a one-of-a-kind, firsthand record of the immigrant experience.

After closing for three years for renovation, the US Immigration Station at Angel Island had a reopening on February 15 2009. About a thousand people decided to make the pilgrim ferry trip despite the chilly and stormy weather.

The Dedication Ceremony was conducted inside a giant tent with the site being blessed by the Federated Indians of the Graton Ramcheria. The Consul General of People's Republic of China, Mr. Gao Zhansheng spoke bilingually briefly, "This reopening presented a page of American history, recording Chinese immigrants in early 20th Century left chaotic and back-ward mother land for America- the land of freedom. They received unfair treatment due to The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act with detention for a few weeks to a few months in this Island. The poems on the wall reflected their frustration and dreams".

Among the subsequent dignitaries was Cynthia Garritt, Superintendent of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty National Monument and she was excited in the cooperation to commemorate immigration history. There was a long applause to honor the group who came through Angel Island Immigration Station. They were eager and ready to tell their stories. It was heavy downpour during the ceremony. However, it turned into drizzle at the conclusion. Among the sound of the big drum, a team of three Chinese lions dance came to live to honor and celebrate

with a ribbon cutting for the covered stairway. By the nearby edge of the coastline, the view was magnificent with the hanger of the big bronze bell inscribed — Angel Island 1910.

The Great White Building was the Immigration Station from 1910 to 1940. There were living quarters for European men and women, Chinese men and women, with their distinct cultural belonging in clothing, reading materials and even games. One thing in common was they all hang their clothes for drying. The European living quarters were less crowded. The Chinese dormitories were cramped, typically a violation of San Francisco City Ordinance Standard enforced in Chinatown — 500 square foot for each occupant. On the walls, there were hundreds of inscriptions. These were powerful contemporary records of the thousands of individual detainees in this fenced building and mesh windows. They left behind what they saw, thought and felt about their incarceration and their hopes for the future. The followings were two from the collection.

Poem 1

Everyone says traveling to North American is a pleasure.

I suffered misery on the ship and sadness in the wooden building.

After several interactions, still I am not done.

I sigh because my compatriots are being forcibly detained.

Poem 2

Detained in this wooden house for several tens of days.

It is all because of the Mexican exclusion law which implicates me

It's a pity heroes have no way of exercising their prowess,

I can only await the word so I can snap Zu's whip. From now on, I am departing far from this building.

All of my fellow villagers are rejoicing with me.

Don't say that everything within is Western styled.

Even if it is built of Jade, it has turned into a cage.
(Ref. 1)

In the middle of the building was an interrogation room with an old fashion wooden desk, a gooseneck lamp, a manual type-writer and

a black dial telephone. I had a sudden chill in recalling Ms. Quok Shee who was detained over six hundred days and underwent numerous long interrogations of over one hundred questions in this setting of confinement and confrontation. (Ref.2) It was the official policy to do so in the hope of catching discrepancies for the ground of deportation.

1849 California Gold Rush attracted large number of Chinese laborers for America in seeking fortune. They were recruited for building the Transcontinental Railroad. However, economy hard time following Civil War gave labor leader Dennis Kearny and his Workman's Party opportunity to incarnate anti-Chinese animosity, leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act 1882 which was the foremost significant restriction on the immigration in US history based solely on race. This Act excluded Chinese "skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining" from entering the country for ten years under penalty of imprisonment and deportation. Furthermore, any Chinese who left US needed certificate for re-entry. Chinese had a hard time in return home to unite with their families or start a family in Gold Mountain.

The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake destroyed City Hall and the Hall of Records. As a result, many immigrants claimed their family relation and resident Chinese-American citizens. Angel Island Immigration Station was the West Coast gate keeper in the process of determining



the truthfulness of Chinese immigrant status claims known as "Paper Son". In addition, Chinese had to pass medical examination for Asian contagious and parasitic diseases. Many were deported for failing the health test. Contrary to the expectation of freedom, the Chinese passengers lost their freedom upon landing on Angel Island. They were detained in the barrack circled by fence to prevent escape and unauthorized visitors. The only permitted daily visitors were religious organization women

members who volunteered to help. Katherine Maurer was honored and respected as the Angel of Angel Island in easing the dull and monotonous life of detainees. A woman acted on the day to bring her legacy alive.

Not afraid of the uncertainty of American fate, detainees dared to file mistreatment complaints on food quality. A riot broke out in 1919, the staff called for federal troops to restore peace and order. Seeking help and relief, they plead to Six Companies, Chinese Consul General and Chinese Chamber of Commerce to file grievance and appeal. The Chinatown flower shop, once an exchange information center for smuggling coaching papers to Angel Island for matching the "Paper Son" story, is still in business.

Chinese were proud people. Facing hardship and racial discrimination laws to humiliate and exclude them, they fully utilized the American legal system by hiring lawyers to take the grievance to American courts on Constitutional laws. Especially in the case of Angel Island detention, they filed petitions for a writ of habeas corpus and due process obviously in strong faith of equality, liberty and justice for all.

After touring inside the building, I walked across the path to the Hospital Building to see the Monument dedicated in 1979. It was a big stone slab with a pair Chinese inscription "Leaving their homes and villages, they cross the ocean/only to endure confinement in these barracks /Conquering frontiers and barriers/they pioneered/A new life by the Golden Gate" (Ref 3). I stood by the side and paid tribute to the Chinese forbearers. They endured the hardship, humiliation and discrimination and stood tall as a model minority of hardworking, creative and success with the legacy of "Ten miles a day". I recalled another Chinese poem in desperation and despair on the wall. I wondered how many buried their heart in Gold Mountain and Angel Island.

America has power, but not justice.

In prison, we are victimised as if we were guilty

Given no opportunity to explain, it was really brutal.

I bow my head in reflection but there is nothing I can do

(Ref. 4)

America is a country of immigrants. Immigration was opted for those who decided and could cross the border or ocean. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 initiated the first restriction immigration policy based on race. Paper Son was a creative alternative to get around the harsh and discriminative act. Angel Island Immigration Station was the gate keeper in securing an effective enforcement. The immigration officers had the authority and power to determine who was inclusive or exclusive, truthful or fraudulent. It would be easy to enforce in the millennium as DNA linkage is a powerful tool. In the meantime, many American families recently go to adopt children from China to form a bi-racial and bi-culture American Chinese family — 'Paper Parent'.

At last, the Chinese Exclusion Act 1882 was repealed in 1943 when China and the US were allies in World War II. In the 61 years of Exclusion, many Chinese-American families suffered the misery; harshness and hardship by the immigration laws, harassment and fear: the lonely old bachelors in Chinatowns, the suicide of deportees and family separation coupled by the repressive legislative, social and political restriction. The Repeal enabled Chinese in America the opportunity of family reunification and becoming immigrants and citizens. The Exclusion Act was the white man's prejudices, fears and greed of the Yellow Peril and Red Menace, then and now, whether by Denis Kearny, Joseph McCarthy or Chris Cox.

I was excited to visit Angel Island to learn and review a chapter in Chinese-American immigration history of challenge and struggle in another time and another day a century later. The wind dropped and the rain stopped as I stepped outside the barrack. In the distant skyline of Golden Gate Bridge, the cloud opened up. It seemed that I saw a rainbow with the mirages of Chinese faces of miners, farmers, railway laborers, laundry men, governors, congressmen, cabinet members, Nobel prize winners, university chancellors, commissioners, sport stars and TV

anchors. Gradually, my vision was blurred.
Whether it was tears or rain, I could not tell.

The above essay is my tribute and honor to the thousand of Chinese who contributed to United States of America with their sacrifice, diligence and creation which we all enjoy. It is my gratitude to the late Uncle Wayne Sit and Auntie Maty who sponsored our family immigration and showed a model of success in the Gold Mountain and encouraged participation in American democracy; and the late uncles, D. H. Jung and H. Sit who came under "Paper Son".

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