

Angel Island's Asian Immigration History

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One can imagine that the Chinese came across the Pacific Ocean to America with promising expectations of starting a free life. Little did they know after landing on Angel island, they would be detained and questioned. Given their enprisoned situation and enforced discriminating policies, they were left with disappointment, regret, and anger.

The Exclusion Act of 1882 was a major factor in immigration, as it enforced the Chinese to be inspected before entering the US. This was the first time America had prevented immigration on the basis of race. Due to this act, many were detained at the Barracks of Angel island for weeks to months, waiting to enter the US. The heartwrenching experiences of those who were detained and interrogated, fearing deportation, is something that will forever remain part of American history.

Entering the detention barracks, the first thing we noticed was the multitude of carvings on the walls. These walls were the voices of immigrants kept inside the barracks. When we got the chance to see the English translations, we got a glimpse of what they must have gone through; so much frustration, fear, and anxiety during their detainment in Angel Island.

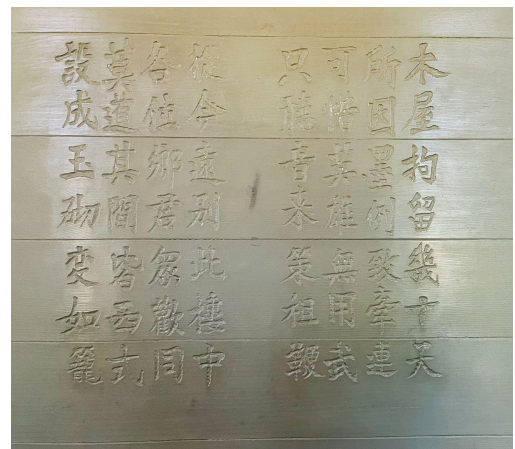
A majority of men detainees were pretty young, ranging from 14 to 18 years of age. Some were not properly educated at the time, and as a result knew basic calligraphy. However, some of the poems found were high-quality, revealing that older, well-educated men also had to stay at the barracks along with the younger children. Some of the features we noted were carved notable poetry in a variety of languages, a majority of them being in chinese. We also observed Tang Poetry, specifically found with rhyming patterns and rules. Some of the poems were written in ink, while others used a classical Cantonese technique. As we read through the poetry, we got an understanding of the homesickness, anger and hopelessness they must have felt.

Poem 135 is one of the most notable poems carved on Angel Island, revealing the themes of false hope and transition by using words such as “cage” that imply negative connotations.

English translation

*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 that 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.*

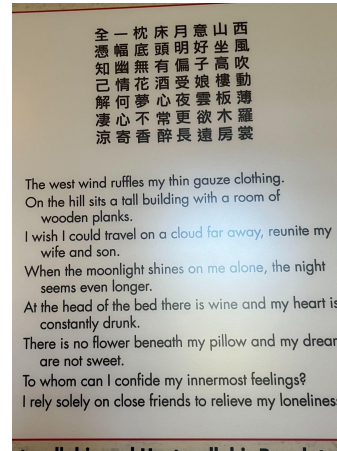


This is a reproduction of Poem 135, one of the many poems carved on the barracks of Angel Island

Poem 135



An image of another one of the poems carved on the Mens Barrack Walls of Angel island



An image of a poem along with its English translation. Displayed in the tour

These surviving poems on the walls record unique perspectives on what it was like to be detained as an immigrant on Angel Island. The barracks at Angel Island contain those voices that still resonate with us and remain as an important part of our American heritage.

Many of the situations immigrants had to face are the result of common mistakes we make in our policies - for instance, the Exclusion Act. Vice Mayor Chao, who had also accompanied us on the trip, made an interesting observation stating, "I think whenever we want to adapt a policy to stop a problem, we want to make sure it does not create another problem to solve later. The Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted to solve a problem at that time where domestic laborers were in fear of competition from Chinese laborers." In addition, she explains the importance of enacting policies that are beneficial in the long-run versus those that end up being overlooked.

These discriminatory policies seem to have been a thing of the past, but even so, we can still see many instances of Asian exclusion and xenophobia today. During the discussion time, many of us talked about how movements such as Asian hate are part of a history that goes further back than just last year.

Other things people mentioned were that above all these tragic events, we also had leaders and impactful immigrants that stood up to these policies and made our American History into the way we see it today.

For instance, Katherine was a loyal volunteer who often visited the women and children barracks on Angel Island. Known as the "Angel" of Angel Island, Katherine volunteered to do whatever she could do to help the women and children detainees for over 27 years. Her contributions greatly influenced their lives and made their situations and crowded living conditions more bearable.



An image of our tour guide holding up a picture of Katherine spending time with the women and children at the barracks.



An image of the women and children's bunk beds - People often had to climb up the crowded bunk beds since there were no ladders.

Later when she retired, she took her records of Angel Island and burned them to ensure that none of the detainees at Angel Island would be at risk of getting deported.

At the end of the trip, we were not only able to empathize with these people but we were able to take these moments in history as lessons. As much as these events in history were painful to watch, they proved as extremely significant moments that teach us to never make the same mistakes again.