

## Major Themes and Influences of the Poems at Angel Island

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The poems at Angel Island are among the most dramatic finds in American literature. The crumbling buildings of the former immigration station in San Francisco were scheduled to be demolished, when bits and pieces of Chinese writing were glimpsed behind the peeling paint. These characters turned out to be poetry, carved into the wooden walls of the station by would be immigrant laborers from China. As a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, these sojourners were detained, sometimes for months, on this island in San Francisco Bay. While they are significant reflections of the economic and labor conditions in California at the turn of the century, these poems turned out to be more than historical relics. They both question and uphold the traditional American ideologies of Equal and Unlimited Opportunity and the Frontier, and they are sterling examples of the refiguring of the self that is at the heart of most immigration tales. They also stand as a foundation of Chinese-American literature, as they look back

At Chinese history and poetry while foretelling themes that will be important in later authors. Besides their important historical value, these poems provide a remarkable commentary on the themes of alienation, immigration, labor, and race in America.

### I. Economic and labor conditions in California at the turn of the century.

After the War with Mexico, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo added California, New Mexico, Nevada and parts of Colorado, Arizona and Utah to the United States. Chinese labor was initially welcomed to help tame America's new frontier. Along with building the railroad, they were pivotal to California's fledgling agriculture and fishing industries. They reclaimed swamp land in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and developed the shrimp and abalone fisheries there. By 1852, Chinese represented an astounding 25% of the entire work force in California (Takaki 79).

However, as their numbers grew, they became caught between so-called "white" labor's struggle for better working conditions, and capital's exploitation of workers. A post civil war recession led to high unemployment throughout the 1870's. Scrambling for increasingly scarce jobs, "white" miners, field hands, and factory workers, began anti-Chinese movements. The Workingmen's Party, an Irish labor group, was particularly vocal in the "Chinese must go" campaigns of this time. Employers ensured these racial divisions would persist by segregating their laborers so they could not unite for better working conditions. Furthermore, they developed a dual wage system to pay Asian laborers less than other workers, pitting the groups against each other to depress wages for both (Takaki 13). Often, Chinese were used as "strikebreakers." Anti-Chinese sentiment, laws, and physical assaults, intensified until Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, barring Chinese immigrant laborers.

The Chinese experience is an example of how often race forms the language of class conflicts in America. To protest the use of Chinese laborers in the cigar industry, Sacramento's cigar makers created a special "white label" to catch public attention at the 1879 State Fair. In an 1862 act, Chinese were taxed to "protect free white labor against competition with Chinese" (Hing 193, Saxton 120, Olmstead 285, Cole 19, Lowe 180). In 1876, the Marin Journal published charges against the Chinese presence in California on behalf of the "white" working men of the state and their families:

That he is a slave . . . no fit competitor for an American freeman . . . That American men, women and children cannot be what free people should be, and compete with such degraded creatures in the labor market . . . the health, wealth and prosperity and happiness of our State demand their expulsion from our shores. (Lee 61-2)

The Chinese clearly saw that the source of their oppression was both economics and racism. As one poem notes:

*I am distressed that we Chinese are detained in this wooden building.  
It is actually racial barriers which cause difficulties on Yingtai Island. [1]*

## II. American ideologies of Opportunity and the Frontier.

Economic opportunity is the overwhelming reason immigrants continue to come to America, and the Chinese of the turn of the century were no exception:

*Instead of remaining a citizen of China, I willingly became an ox.  
I intended to come to America to earn a living.*

One author has left behind the traditionally respected Chinese pursuits of scholar and warrior, to make money:

*Leaving behind my writing brush and removing my sword, I came to America . . .  
[to attain] my ambition and become successful.*

Their goals were reinforced by well established beliefs in economic and social mobility that was part of the ideology of the American Frontier, made popular by Frederick Jackson Turner. In response to the prevailing assumption that our democracy had come to the New World by way of England, Turner presented the famous paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in 1893. Though challenged from its introduction, the essay remains influential to scholars of American Exceptionalism. According to Turner, the frontier signified a country without boundaries; and corresponded to a conviction that in America, there were no limits to what one could become socially or economically. This belief in upward mobility was ideologically connected with the outward mobility of the exhortation to "Go West."

Chinese immigrants to America were connected to the West and the ideology of the American frontier in many ways. They entered America through San Francisco, not Ellis Island. They built the railroads that brought settlers to the emerging states, and developed the industries that would drive their economies. Yet, while their contributions to the future of the American frontier were considerable, its ideological promises were often denied them.

Various mainstream American writers have questioned whether our famed equal opportunity to financial success is an egalitarian result of meritocratic competition, or is actually a class issue. William Dean Howell's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) overtly mocked the Horatio Alger "rags to riches" image, and novels such as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Frank Norris' *McTeague* (1899) questioned whether all can move freely within the American economic system. Other authors provided "windows" on the classes left behind as the American economy expanded, such as Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) and Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Child of the Streets* (1896). John Dos Passos' 1930's USA trilogy explored the ideology of equal opportunity frustrated by various kinds of upper class controls. His famous quote "all right we are two nations" is a reflection of his position that equal opportunity and equal legal representation was not, and would never be, equally distributed within the economic system of capitalism.

The Angel Island poetry is part of this examination. The Chinese saw America as a land of equality and opportunity. Certainly, they never expected to be imprisoned:

*I told myself that going by this way would be easy.  
Who was to know that I would be imprisoned at Devil's Pass?  
How was anyone to know that my dwelling place would be a prison?*

Their disappointment at the denial of their opportunity for opportunity, is expressed in the elaborate revenge plots of some poems.

*I will not speak of love when I level the immigration station!*

*An advantageous position for revenge will surely come one day.  
I will certainly behead the barbarians and spare not a single blade of grass.*

### **III. The attempt to refigure the self is at the heart of immigration literature.**

In the case of the Chinese poets, the mythical immigrant's rise from "rags to riches," has been interrupted:

*The Western styled buildings are lofty; but I have not the luck to live in them.  
How was anyone to know that my dwelling place would be a prison?*

*Over a hundred poems are on the walls.  
Looking at them, they are all pining at the delayed progress.*

*As long as I am imprisoned, how can I dare strive for supremacy?*

Often, these poems refer to Angel Island as a world in between worlds, and outside the tangible universe. No longer in China, and unable to enter the American mainland, the poets highlight the displacement, anxieties, and alienation that is so often at the heart of the assimilation process:

*A flickering lamp keeps this body company.  
I am like pear blossoms which have already fallen.  
Pity the bare branches during the late spring.*

Within the unstable light of this impermanent world, the poet compares his condition to trees between the spring flowering and autumn fruit bearing seasons. Prejudice in America constructed the Chinese as legal and social "aliens" ineligible for citizenship, and attributed non-assimilable characteristics to their community. Angel Island poets became acutely aware of their status as "perpetual foreigners"; not citizens and not even immigrants. Upon this island, they had truly lost their way.

The attempt to enter another culture often leads to a psychological state of "double consciousness" for many immigrants. Aware that they have left the society that formed them behind, they often write that they feel as if they are imposters in their new country. "Can it be that I am I," laments David Levinsky in Abraham Cahan's 1917 novel about a poor Jewish immigrant who makes a fortune in the clothing business. "I cannot escape from my old self," he concludes. "My past and my present do not comport well." Uprooted from his own culture and transplanted into an alien one, this Angel Island poet has become aware of the separation of his inner self and his physical situation:

*The low building with three beams merely shelters the body.  
It is unbearable to relate the stories accumulated on the Island slopes.*

Some try to place their unfair imprisonment within the comforting and familiar framework of Tao:

*Gain or lose, how is one to know what is predestined?  
Rich or poor, who is to say it is not the will of heaven?*

However, others realize that the injustice of their imprisonment is not necessarily predestination. The laws they termed *keli*: meaning tyrannical or unjust laws, are characterized as travesties of American principles:

*Even while they are tyrannical, they still claim to be humanitarian.  
I should regret my taking the risks of coming in the first place.*

*America has power, but not justice.  
In prison, we were victimized as if we were guilty.  
Given no opportunity to explain, it was really brutal.*

#### **IV. These poems reflect the styles and themes of classical Chinese poetry.**

Most of the Angel Island poets do not seem to have been highly educated; however, most Chinese were aware of popular versions of classical poetry. The workers held at Angel Island were predominately males in their teens or early twenties. Because of the fear of official reprisal, evidence about the authorship of the poems is sketchy to nonexistent. Occasionally, however, they make oblique references to their origins:

*Poem by One Named Xu, From Xiangshan*

*By One from Taishan.*

Most were from the southern rural province of Guandong, and had come to America for work because of the high taxes and political chaos caused by China's loss in the British Opium Wars. One poem indicates the poet has had to flee troubled times:

*The silvery red shirt is half covered with dust . . .*

Although the poems are written in colloquial Cantonese, and numerous grammatical errors belie the authors' unsophisticated peasant backgrounds, most attempt to imitate the well known classical style and use of historical allegory of *jueju* poetry. This style perfected four line stanzas, of usually five or seven syllables in each line. The format of Introduction, Development, Turnaround and Conclusion was developed in the T'ang dynasty:[2]

*Leaving behind my writing brush and removing my sword, I came to America.  
Who was to know two streams of tears would flow upon arriving here?  
If there comes a day when I will have attained my ambition and become successful,  
I will certainly behead the barbarians and spare not a single blade of grass.*

The background material of the first line is brought up to date in which the poet's situation has been markedly changed. The style was easily adapted to the poets' dilemmas as they compared their imprisonment with their past lives and their former dreams of the future.[3]

The Angel Island poets follow the classical mode of historical allegory that intersects the legends of the past with their present situation. By far, the most common reference is to the temporary imprisonment of the great King Wen; but they mention a variety of heroes who faced adversity and then went on to greatness, such as Su Wu, Han Xin, Goujian -- and even Napoleon! This use of the past was not an idle display of erudition. If the relevant historical precedent could be identified, the apparent randomness of the present could become comprehensible as one phase in the cyclical process of Tao, or the Way.

*Why should one complain if he is detained and imprisoned here?  
From ancient times, heroes often were the first ones to face adversity.*

The poems are filled with revenge plots also common in classical verse:

*The dragon out of water is humiliated by ants;  
The fierce tiger who is caged is baited by a child . . .  
An advantageous position for revenge will surely come one day.*

As Marlon Hom noted in his review of *Island*, "The Island experience must have been extremely cruel and unbearable to the extent it completely destroyed an immigrant's hope and admiration for America, and replaced those feelings with those of hatred and vengeance" (135). The distrust of American authority lingered for years within the Chinese American community, as a result of their unequal treatment.

Ironically, these long overlooked poems rail in the face of the mainstream American stereotype of "Asian silence." Given the directness of the poetry, it is not surprising that Chinese immigrants fought unceasingly not only for fair working conditions, but for equality in consideration for citizenship as well. Chinese railroad workers went on strike for pay and working hours equal to those of "whites," and there is a long history of legal challenges to the prejudicial citizenship and naturalization laws by Chinese immigrants in this country (see Polster, Lee, Takaki, Daniels). While Chinese Americans could not become citizens, these poems reveal that they knew they were worthy of citizenship.

#### **V. Angel Island Themes in Chinese American Literature.**

The cultural memory of Angel Island haunts Chinese American Literature. One of the first widely published works, Shawn Wong's *Homebase* (1979), claims, "My grandfather's island is Angel Island . . . It was there that he almost died, and that makes it his island" (81). The protagonist dreams he is his grandfather undergoing interrogation. Similarly, Fae Myenne Ng's 1993 novel, *Bone*, recalls the questioning of her stepfather. The celebrated Maxine Hong Kingston, includes a reference to Angel Island in *China Men* (1980). Here, the narrator dreams that her father has written a poem on this wall, but he, like most of the actual Angel Island poets, does not sign his name to protect himself against American law. Ginny Lim's 1991 play, *Paper Angels*, is set in Angel Island.

Because of the historical circumscription of their legal and social freedoms, the subject of economic and social mobility is notably prevalent in Chinese-American texts. Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981) invokes the frontier by featuring a Chinese American cowboy. The trope of the American Dream figures in an overwhelming number of these texts. The dream is vanity and illusion in the World War II Chinatown setting of Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961). The search for the dream drives the Westward movements of the characters in Nieh Hualing's *Mulberry and Peach* (1981). In Chay Yew's 1999 play *Wonderland*, an Asian American family's dreams of material success replace their goals for personal happiness. And, the Chinese American families of Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991) and *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), test the limits of social and economic mobility in America.

These themes were influenced by a certain amount of Americanization that took place before these travelers ever reached San Francisco. The Chinese expected to receive the fabled American "equal treatment under the law." Thus, their poetry reflects both the powerful durability of the ideology of Equality, and the tragic disappointments that can be encountered in the pursuit of the American Dream.

#### **NOTES**

[1] All quotes from the poems are from Cary Nelson's *Anthology of Modern Poetry* (Oxford UP, 2000)

[2] The Complete T'ang Poems includes over 48,000 selections, written by some 2,200 authors and organized into 900 sections. A selected anthology of 300 T'ang poems, *Tang shi sanbai shou*, has remained a proverbial favorite in China since the mid-eighteenth century. Because of its popular significance within the culture, most Chinese, even those with a limited education, would have been familiar with at least the oral tradition of the *Tang shi sanbai shou*, and the poems on Angel Island mimic them in style and subject.

[3] One of the most famous T'ang poets working in this style was Li Po, who inspired modernist Ezra Pound and Beat poet Gary Snyder.

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