



Poetry of Angel Island

Activity

In this activity, you will learn about the poems carved into the walls by Chinese detainees of the Angel Island Immigration Station and **interpret** them to learn more about immigrant experiences there. You will then write an original poem based on the perspective of a detainee.

Vocabulary

- **Chinese Exclusion Act:** a federal law passed in 1882 that prohibited Chinese immigration to the United States.
- **barracks:** buildings used to house groups of people, including prisoners, workers, soldiers, or those detained for immigration procedures.
- **Bureau of Immigration:** forerunner of today's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), formerly Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The agency was responsible for enforcing immigration law.
- **syntax:** how words and phrases are arranged or ordered to form sentences.

Background Information

From 1910 to 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station served as the processing and detention center for hundreds of thousands of immigrants. About one-third of the newcomers came from China, while other immigrants came from Japan, Russia, South Asia, and other Pacific regions. Many came for work or to join family, while others hoped to find refuge from revolutionary violence, colonialism, or persecution in their homelands. Most Chinese immigrants were excluded by law, but certain "exempt" classes could enter or reenter the country. Although the average detention time for Chinese immigrants was 10 days, some were held for weeks and even months.

Immigrant detainees were housed in two separate buildings. Asian women and white people were generally housed in separate detention quarters in the administration building. Asian men were housed in a separate two-story detention barracks building. Many immigrants found the interrogation procedures, medical examinations, and treatments invasive and humiliating. Detainees complained about the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions and the poor quality food at the station. Some Chinese detainees expressed their frustrations through poetry carved into the barracks' walls. Researchers have discovered hundreds of Chinese poems and inscriptions there.

Poetry in Chinese culture has traditionally been a major form of expression for educated Chinese people, and public poetry has been used to highlight injustices, promote the common good, and give voice to oppressed peoples. The poems at Angel Island Immigration Station reflect these qualities and offer insight into detainees' experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Apply

1. Read through the article and poems in **Sources**. The article provides some contextual information about the poems.
2. After reading the poems once, review the [Poetry Analysis Guide](#) before proceeding. Use the Guide and **Worksheet** to collect information about the poems. Additionally, consider the following on **interpreting translated poetry**:

In translated poems, we often lose some of the structural elements of poetry—rhyming patterns, rhythm, and sound are altered significantly when something written in one language is translated into a different language. This means that we often have to focus on theme and context to interpret translated poems.

3. Read the poems in the source "**Poems from Angel Island (1910–1940)**."
 - a. How do you interpret the mood or tone of the first poem? Consider the third line, in which the poet highlights a particular hypocrisy in the treatment of Chinese immigrants.
 - b. Consider some of the imagery in the second poem. How does the poet use such imagery to convey meaning?
 - c. Note some of the comparisons used by the poet in the third poem. How does the poet use these comparisons to convey the situation of immigrants like himself?
4. Read the **poem composed in 2020 by Calvin Ong**.
 - a. Consider that, unlike the other poems in this activity, this example was written in 2020. Ong was himself detained on Angel Island in 1937 for six months.
 - b. Note that he, like other poets from the time, likens the experience to jail and is disillusioned by the hope for the "American dream", contrasting sharply with the realities of being an Asian immigrant in the early 20th century.
 - c. How does Ong connect his experiences on Angel Island with the contemporary Asian American experience of COVID-19?
 - d. Consider how historical events may help us interpret and understand current events.
5. Write an original poem from the perspective of a detainee on Angel Island, taking into account what you have learned about how poetry can help us understand, interpret, or contextualize peoples' experiences of particular events. Keep in mind the importance of such sources in expanding our knowledge of history. If needed, use this database to research more on the immigrant experiences at Angel Island.

Angel Island, Poetry

Angel Island was in use as an immigration station from 1910 to 1940. After the immigration station closed in 1940, the island was used as a military base. The buildings that constituted the station fell into disrepair and were scheduled for demolition. But in 1970, California state park ranger Alexander Weiss discovered poems carved into multiple walls of the detention center. He notified officials in the park system, but interest was lacking, and the demolition was slated to continue.



Weiss next contacted a professor at San Francisco State University, Dr. George Araki. Araki and photographer Mak Takahashi visited the island and documented the carvings. Their findings gained the notice of the Asian American community in San Francisco, and the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee (AIISHAC) was formed, led by Paul Chow. All together, there are 220 Chinese poems, 96 Chinese inscriptions, 62 Japanese inscriptions, and other writings in English, Russian, and Korean.

Chinese Poems

In 1976, the California state legislature allotted \$250,000 to save the immigration station, including the poetry held within, and to designate Angel Island a state monument. The poems that were saved were written exclusively by men, many from villages in the Pearl River delta region in Guangdong Province in southern China. There are reports of poems written by women, but they were lost to history when the administrative building, where the women were housed, burned in 1940.

Although many of the poems were written anonymously, they reflect the feelings of the men detained. They provide a glimpse into the thoughts and experiences of Chinese immigrants at Angel Island, including their feelings about being detained, missing family, loneliness, defiance, despair, and thoughts on human nature and morality.

These poems were written in the classical style that was popularized in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). They largely adhere to poetic rules of syntax, structure, meter, and rhyme. The poems often have a lyrical quality that is best represented when read in Chinese or Cantonese. One unusual example even contains a hidden message; the poems are meant to be read from top to bottom, but in one case, if the first character of each line is read from left to right, it translates to "Angel Island Immigration Station is to be eliminated."

Some of the men's poetry has subsequently been copied down, translated, and reproduced in books. Translated into English, one poem reads:

With a hundred kinds of oppressive laws, they mistreat us Chinese.

It is still not enough after being interrogated and investigated several times

We also have to have our chests examined while naked.

Japanese Carvings

The act of carving into the walls of Angel Island to leave one's mark did not stop with the removal of Chinese immigrants. Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) and "enemy aliens" held at Angel Island left their mark just as the Chinese immigrants had before them. On the second floor of the detention barracks, Japanese prisoners produced a second set of wall carvings. One example of the Japanese carvings reads "November 7, 1945, at 12 o'clock. Headed for Yokohama in homeland—approximately 700 . . . from McCoy [Camp McCoy, Wisconsin] Internment Camp leaving San Francisco." Again, individuals felt the need to document their history on the walls of Angel Island as a means of expressing their plight, loneliness, and frustration.

Poems from Angel Island (1910–1940)

During Chinese exclusion, the U.S. government established a system of detaining and interrogating Chinese immigration applicants. Between 1910 and 1940, an immigration facility on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay served as a detention center for immigrants from the other side of the Pacific; most of them came from China. As many as 175,000 Chinese immigrants were detained at Angel Island during this time period, where the interrogation and screening process for each individual could take several months or longer. Isolated in prisonlike barracks in a foreign land, the several hundred poems carved on the walls of the detention center, like the three selected ones below, reflected the stress, anguish, and frustrations of the detainees.

1.

I am distressed that we Chinese are detained in this wooden building.
It is actually racial barriers which cause difficulties on Yingtai Island.
Even while they are tyrannical, they still claim to be humanitarian.
I should regret my taking the risks of coming in the first place.

2.

In the quiet of night, I heard, faintly, the whistling of wind.
The forms and shadows saddened me; upon seeing the landscape, I composed a poem.
The floating clouds, the fog, darken the sky.
The moon shines faintly as the insects chirp.
Grief and bitterness entwined are heaven sent.
The sad person sits alone, leaning by a window.

3.

Alas, yellow souls suffer under the brute force of the white race!
Like shouting at a dog which has lost its home, we are forced into jail.
Like a pig chased into a basket, we are sternly locked in.
Our souls languish in a snowy vault; we are really not even the equal of cattle and horses.

"Day Dreamer" (2020), by Angel Island detainee Calvin Ong

This poem, titled "Day Dreamer," was written by former Angel Island detainee Calvin Ong for the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation's virtual exhibit "Voices of Resilience" in 2020. Calvin Ong emigrated from China in 1937 alone at the age of ten. He was detained for a few months at the Angel Island Immigration Station before being deported back to China. He returned to the United States in 1949. This poem likens Ong's experience with discrimination as a new immigrant with anti-Asian sentiment he encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The poem and its translation are available in the inset PDF.

TRANSLATION:

Coming to America in 1937 was hard with some sorrows
I was detained in a jail-like wooden barrack for half a year
My goal was to see the American Dream
Sheltered in place in 2020 due to a pandemic
Encountering similar accusatory and discriminatory looks and remarks due to my heritage
When shall I receive my equality and freedom?



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Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation

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Poetry of Angel Island

Collect and Organize Information

Instruction

In this activity, you will learn about the poems carved into the walls by Chinese detainees of the Angel Island Immigration Station and interpret them to learn more about immigrant experiences there. Use the poetry analysis guide in Tasks to help you fill out the worksheet below. Use the second page to write your original poem.

Analyzing Angel Island Poetry	
1 Context	
2 Theme	
3 Language	
4 Structure	
5 Revisit and Paraphrase	

Name _____

Class _____

Instruction | After analyzing the poems provided in Sources, write an original poem from the perspective of an Angel Island detainee.

Response
