

POEMS FROM ANGEL ISLAND

From 1910 until 1940, people arriving from China were detained on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay to await approval or denial of their request for entry into the United States. Even people who had been long-term residents of the United States and had only left the country for a short time to visit friends and family in China were subject to the same procedures of detention upon their return. Detained for weeks, months, even years in crowded, unsanitary quarters with only the barest necessities, many Chinese wrote poems on the walls of the dormitories to pass the time and express their anxiety, sadness, fear, and frustration. The poems were discovered in 1970 and have been collected as a testament to the dreams of the thousands of Chinese who came seeking entry into the United States.

POEM #38

Being idle in the wooden building, I opened a window.
The morning breeze and bright moon lingered together.
I reminisce the native village far away, cut off by clouds and mountains.
On the little island the waiting of cold, wild geese can be faintly heard.
The hero who has lost his way can talk meaninglessly of the sword.
The poet at the end of the road can only ascend a tower.
One should know that when the country is weak, the people's spirit dies.
Why else do we come to this place to be imprisoned?

木屋閒來把窗開，
曉風明月共徘徊。
故鄉遠憶雲山斷，
小島微聞寒雁哀。
失路英雄空說劍，
窮途騷士且登台。
應知國弱人心死，
何事囚困此處來？

POEM #8

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

國民不為甘為牛，
意至美洲作營謀。
洋樓高聳無緣住，
誰知棲所是監牢？

Why did these two writers come to the United States?

CRUDE POEM INSPIRED BY THE LANDSCAPE

The ocean encircles the peak.
Rough terrain surrounds this prison.
There are few birds flying over the cold hills.
The wild goose messenger* cannot find its way.
I have been detained and obstacles have been put in my way
for half a year.
Melancholy and hate gather on my face.
Now that I must return to my country,
I have toiled like the jingwei bird** in vain.

感景拙詠

滄海圍孤峯，
崎嶇困牢籠。
鳥疎寒山緜，
鴻使莫尋踪。
留難經半載，
愁恨積滿容。
今將歸國去，
空勞精衛功。

* mail service

** According to a Chinese folk tale, a young girl drowned while playing in the Eastern Sea. Her soul changed to a bird called the "jingwei," who, resenting the fact that the ocean took her life, carried pebbles in her beak from the Western mountains and dropped them into the ocean, hoping to fill it.

From Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, eds., *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*, Chinese Culture Foundation, 1980.