Angel Island Immigration Station

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Summary and Keywords

The Angel Island Immigration Station (1910–1940), located in San Francisco Bay, was one of twenty-four ports of entry established by the U.S. government to process and detain immigrants entering and leaving the country. Although popularly called the “Ellis Island of the West,” the Angel Island station was in fact quite different from its counterpart in New York. Ellis Island was built in 1892 to welcome European immigrants and to enforce immigration laws that restricted but did not exclude European immigrants. In contrast, as the primary gateway for Chinese and other Asian immigrants, the Angel Island station was built in 1910 to better enforce discriminatory immigration policies that targeted Asians for exclusion. Chinese immigrants, in particular, were subjected to longer physical exams, interrogations, and detentions than any other immigrant group. Out of frustration, anger, and despair, many of them wrote and carved Chinese poems into the barrack walls. In 1940, a fire destroyed the administration building, and the immigration station was moved back to San Francisco. In 1963, the abandoned site became part of the state park system, and the remaining buildings were slated for demolition. Thanks to the collective efforts of Asian American activists and descendents of former detainees, the U.S. Immigration Station at Angel Island was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1997, and the immigration site, including the Chinese poetry on the barrack walls, was preserved and transformed into a museum of Pacific immigration for visitors.

Keywords: Angel Island Immigration Station, Asian immigration, Board of Special Inquiry, Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese immigrant poetry, Ellis Island of the West, immigrant inspection and detention, immigration, immigration laws and policies, National Historic Landmark

The Angel Island Immigration Station, located in San Francisco Bay, was one of twenty-four ports of entry established by the U.S. government to process and detain immigrants entering and leaving the country. From 1910 to 1940, one million people were processed through the port of San Francisco, including 341,000 aliens and 209,000 U.S. citizens who were arriving and 483,000 aliens and 183,000 U.S. citizens who were departing. Deportees, repatriates, alien stowaways, deserting seamen, and migrants in transit also arrived and departed from San Francisco during the same time period. An estimated half a million of them were detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station for immigration.
inspection and while awaiting appeal decisions or deportation. Their stays could be as short as overnight or as long as two years. Which immigrants were sent to Angel Island, how long they were detained, and how they fared there depended on immigration policies that treated individuals differently according to their race, class, gender, and nationality.

It wasn’t always that way. For much of its history, the United States had an open-door immigration policy. From the colonial era through the mid-19th century, foreign immigration was encouraged to help settle newly colonized lands in an expanding America. The federal government passed its first law regulating immigration in 1875, as a way to define who was fit to be admitted into the country and become an American citizen. Responding to rising anti-Chinese sentiment, that the Chinese were taking away jobs, were posing as a moral and racial threat to the United States, and were unfit to ever become true Americans, Congress passed the 1875 Page Law to bar the entry of Chinese laborers brought to the United States involuntarily, as well as Chinese and Japanese women brought for the purpose of prostitution. It was followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States for ten years and reaffirmed existing laws banning Chinese aliens from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. (The exclusion law was renewed in 1892 and not repealed until 1943.) In effect, these laws legalized the racial exclusion and deportation of immigrants considered to be threats to the United States for the first time in the country’s history. Similar racist stereotypes were applied to Japanese, Koreans, South Asians, and Filipinos who followed in the footsteps of the Chinese, resulting in the passage of additional laws to exclude Asians from the United States.

Reflecting growing anti-immigrant sentiments across the country, the United States began to close its doors to a wide range of people. Beginning in 1882, a general immigration law barred criminals, prostitutes, paupers, lunatics, idiots, and those likely to become public charges (LPC) from entering the United States. The Immigration Act of 1917 enacted new provisions, including a literacy test for all adult immigrants and restrictions on suspected radicals. In response to anti-Asian sentiment, the act also denied entry to immigrants from India, Burma, Siam, the Malay States, Arabia, Afghanistan, part of Russia, and most of the Polynesian Islands.

The Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924 set quotas for each immigrant group based on national origins with the intent to limit, but not totally exclude, new arrivals from Southern and Eastern European countries. By adding a clause to the 1924 Act that denied admission to all aliens who were “ineligible to citizenship,” a legal classification that applied only to Asians, Congress closed the door on any further Japanese immigration. Filipinos were the last Asian group to be excluded. Considered “U.S. nationals” while the Philippine Islands was a U.S. colony, they were not subject to U.S. immigration laws. That changed in 1934, when Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, which gave the Philippines independence, thereby changing the status of Filipinos to “aliens,” and restricted their immigration to a measly quota of fifty individuals per year.
Each of these various laws was designed to restrict and exclude Asian immigration to the United States. But they did not end it altogether. The Chinese Exclusion laws allowed for merchants, students, teachers, diplomats, and travelers to still apply for admission. Court cases brought by the Chinese eventually allowed for the wives and minor children of U.S. citizens and merchants to do the same. Family members of Japanese and Koreans already in the United States could also continue coming, as could small numbers of Filipinos and South Asian students. More often than not, they applied for admission to the United States through the immigration station on Angel Island.

Although two-thirds of the newcomers on Angel Island were Chinese and Japanese, there were also immigrants from other parts of Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Australia. Russians and Mexicans came to America seeking refuge from the revolutionary violence and disorder ravaging their homelands; Japanese “picture brides” and Chinese “paper sons” crossed the Pacific to join their families; South Asian and Filipino laborers sought work in the fields of California’s Central Valley; and Korean, Russian, and Jewish refugees hoped to find freedom from religious and political persecution. Some, like the Chinese and Japanese, crossed the Pacific Ocean directly from their homelands. Others took more circuitous routes to San Francisco: South Asians came after first working in Manila, Hong Kong, or Tokyo; Russian and Jewish refugees crossed Siberia and Manchuria before boarding ships in Japan bound for the United States; Koreans came by way of Shanghai or Hawaii, as did Filipinos; and Spanish laborers arrived in the city after working in Panama, Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, and Hawaii.

The Angel Island Immigration Station also played a key role in removing and deporting immigrants already in the United States on charges of prostitution, LPC, criminal offenses, radical politics, and fraudulent entry. Immigration raids became a common occurrence in certain communities as U.S. government officials increased their efforts to track, arrest, and deport immigrants who had entered or remained in the country in violation of the law. Many Filipinos and Chinese Mexicans were also detained and deported from Angel Island during the repatriation campaigns of the 1930s. Angel Island was thus both an entry point for immigrants seeking better lives in America and a last stop on a forced journey out of the country.
Building the “Ellis Island of the West”

Although popularly called the “Ellis Island of the West,” the Angel Island station was in fact quite different from its counterpart in New York. Ellis Island was built in 1892 to welcome European immigrants and to enforce immigration laws that restricted but did not exclude European immigrants. For the next sixty-two years, twelve million immigrants were processed through Ellis Island within a few hours. They were given a cursory physical exam and asked a total of twenty-nine questions to test their sound minds and ability to make a living in America. Only 2 percent were excluded and deported. The overwhelming majority went on to become U.S. citizens and to realize their American dream. In contrast, the Angel Island Immigration Station was built in 1910, as the primary gateway for Chinese and other Asian immigrants, to better enforce discriminatory immigration policies that targeted Asians for exclusion. Chinese immigrants, in particular, were subjected to invasive physical exams, exhaustive interrogations, and were often detained for weeks and months at a time while waiting for decisions on their applications and appeals.

Before the immigration station on Angel Island opened in 1910, Chinese passengers arriving in San Francisco were kept on board ships and transferred from ship to ship until final decisions in their cases were made. The San Francisco county jail, for men, and mission homes, for women, were also used as detention facilities for those who could not post bond or who had been ordered deported. Beginning in 1898, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company converted some of its general offices on Pier 40 into a detention shed to house Chinese immigrants. The two-story ramshackle facility proved to be overcrowded, unsanitary, unsafe, and not escape-proof. After considerable protest from the Chinese community, immigration officials declared the shed beyond repair and recommended that a new immigration station be erected on Angel Island to better accommodate the growing numbers of aliens. It was thought that the island location would prevent Chinese immigrants from being coached by friends and relatives, and it would also protect Americans from contagious diseases that Asians allegedly carried. Moreover, the immigration station, like Alcatraz prison close by, would be escape-proof.

In 1904–1905, Congress appropriated $250,000 to construct the new immigration station, the War Department transferred twenty acres of land on the north side of the island for that purpose, and architect Walter J. Matthews was hired to design the new facility, patterned after the “cottage system” and campus setting on Ellis Island, where buildings devoted to specific functions, such as administration, medical services, and detention, were grouped together. After numerous delays, the immigration station finally opened on January 21, 1910, under the directorship of Commissioner of Immigration Hart Hyatt North and over the objections of Chinatown leaders, who complained that the location was inconvenient for witnesses. By the end of that year, the Bureau of Immigration, under pressure from the Asiatic Exclusion League, had removed North from office for being too lenient with “East Indian” applicants.
The staff of thirty employees quickly grew to 137 employees by 1921, as the work of the immigration station increased in volume and complexity. That year, the station was reorganized into six divisions: law (two inspectors); files, records, accounts, and statistics (one inspector); Chinese immigration (eighteen employees); non-Chinese immigration (five inspectors); boarding and primary inspection (three inspectors); deportation and detention (one inspector). There were also seven inspectors who were stationed in the city office in San Francisco. In 1937, the “Oriental Division” replaced the Chinese division with a staff of fourteen immigrant inspectors, eight clerks, seven Chinese interpreters, and two Japanese interpreters. Reflecting the new focus on repatriation and deportation in the 1930s, there was also a “Detention and Deportation Division,” which had one clerk, one telephone operator, twenty-four guards, and four matrons. Those who were needed to maintain and operate the immigration station facilities on a daily basis—engineers, gardeners, electricians, cooks, and hospital workers—lived on the island in employee cottages provided by the government. Other employees involved with the bureaucratic work of processing applications—immigrant inspectors, interpreters, and clerks—commuted from the mainland on a daily basis.

The government quickly learned that the station’s insular location was far from satisfactory. Fresh water was scarce, and the station was expensive to operate since all essentials had to be shipped from the mainland. A few months after the facility opened, Surgeon Melvin Glover and Acting Commissioner of Immigration Luther Steward submitted reports highly critical of the many physical and sanitary drawbacks in the design and construction of the hospital and immigration station. Criticisms of the shoddy construction and recommendations that the immigration station be moved back to the mainland continued throughout the history of the Angel Island Immigration Station. But it was not until November of 1940, three months after a fire destroyed the administration building, that the government finally abandoned the site and moved the immigration station to San Francisco.
Enforcing the Laws

The main responsibility of immigration officials on Angel Island was to enforce the nation’s immigration laws. Newcomers applying for admission were subjected to a number of routine procedures that began as soon as their ships docked in San Francisco. During primary inspection, immigration and medical officials climbed aboard the ships to examine the papers and medical condition of all the passengers and crew. Nationality, race, and immigrant and economic status all played a part in determining whether further medical and immigration inspections took place on board the ship or on Angel Island. First-class cabin passengers, who were mostly white, wealthy U.S. citizens or European visitors, received preferential treatment and were given a cursory medical inspection in the privacy of their rooms. They, along with returning residents and those traveling in second class, were usually allowed to land directly from the ship. Third-class and steerage passengers, who were mainly Asians and poor, along with sick passengers and anyone whose papers were in question, were all taken by ferry to Angel Island for a more thorough investigation. On average, 70 percent of the ship’s passengers were usually required to go to Angel Island. While most non-Asians were able to avoid Angel Island altogether or had a very short stay there, all Asian newcomers were ferried to Angel Island, where many were detained for weeks and months while awaiting decisions on their applications.

When the ferry docked at Angel Island, arrivals deposited their luggage in the baggage shed at the end of the wharf and then walked to the administration building, a two-story wood-framed structure that contained inspection, examination, dining, detention, and administrative areas. The main examination room, where passenger documents were examined and where the intake process began, dominated the ground floor of the building. There were four separate waiting areas, each designated for a different class or group of individuals. Asians congregated in the largest room, which was filled with rows of wooden benches. Men and women, including husbands and wives, were separated and not allowed to see or communicate with each other again until they were admitted into the country or deported. Children under the age of twelve stayed with their mothers, while boys over twelve were detained in the male section.

Any arriving passenger who appeared ill was sent directly to the doctor’s office located behind the main examination room. They then proceeded to the hospital for further treatment. Other applicants for admission were ushered up a half flight of stairs to the registry division room, which was partitioned into four large, caged areas with benches lining the two long sides and a processing desk. These areas were also segregated by race. Individuals who needed to be detained on the island were taken here to receive identification numbers and barracks assignments. Chinese and Japanese men were housed in separate sections of the detention barracks; all others were housed on the second floor of the administration building in segregated quarters. Subjected to such procedures, the new arrival’s first impression of America was not one of welcome, but of imprisonment.
The Medical Exam

The next day, new arrivals were taken to the hospital, located northeast of the administration building, for the medical exam. Medical officers on Angel Island were kept very busy, and the high number of patients and examinations sometimes stretched the hospital facility beyond its capacity. In 1910, they examined more than 11,000 immigrants. In 1920, 25,000 people were given medical examinations. Applicants could be excluded for having such “loathsome and dangerously contagious diseases” as trachoma, tuberculosis, syphilis, gonorrhea, and leprosy. Those found to be “insane,” “idiots,” or afflicted with a condition that would affect their ability to earn a living, such as heart disease, hernia, pregnancy, “poor physique,” “nervous affections,” senility, and more, could also be excluded. The medical screenings for these conditions and diseases were designed to protect Americans from diseases and to ensure that only the finest and strongest immigrants were allowed into the country.

The hospital contained patients’ wards, a surgery facility, a mortuary, administrative offices, and communal spaces, including a kitchen, large dining room, small private dining room, and limited sleeping quarters for employees. A “disinfector room” was also located on the first floor, where passenger belongings were fumigated. The hospital reinforced the racial and ethnic segregation policy at the immigration station. It had separate entrances for whites and Asians and separate stairs to keep the different races apart once they were inside the building. On the second floor, separate patient wards for European men, European women, Japanese and Chinese women, Japanese men, and Chinese men were all spaced apart. Several small rooms, including dressing rooms, bathrooms, nurses’ rooms, the doctor’s office, the operating room, and the stairwells separated each patient ward from the next.

As was followed at Ellis Island, public health officers first conducted a line inspection to detect the presence of excludable diseases and medical defects. Eyes were particularly scrutinized for ailments that might impair the sight and lead to an inability to support oneself. Medical screenings could also involve a physical examination of the naked body to search for abnormalities or to confirm the alleged age of an applicant who was suspected of fraudulent entry. But because scientists at the time believed that “Orientals” carried more serious strains of diseases that could be harmful to white Americans, only Asian immigrants were subjected to the indignity of blood and stool examinations to detect traces of parasitic diseases that were classified as dangerously contagious. In 1910, uncinariasis (hookworm) and filiariasis (threadworm) were categorized as excludable diseases, and in 1917, clonorchiasis (liver fluke) was added to the list. The hospital on Angel Island had a state-of-the-art laboratory, and bacterial examinations of blood and waste products became a vital technique in the health screenings of Asian immigrants. During certain years, all second- and third-class passengers, including non-Asians, were also brought to the immigration station and required to take the stool examination.
Because of poor sanitation in rural parts of Asia, medical exclusions based on parasitic diseases primarily affected Asians. It became a convenient excuse to exclude South Asians before they were barred entry by the Immigration Act of 1917. Chinese and Japanese immigrants reacted strongly to what they believed were humiliating and unfair medical procedures. Community protests did result in some changes to medical policies. The U.S. government eventually reclassified some parasitic diseases, such as hookworm and liver fluke, and lifted the penalty of exclusion for anyone with these diseases, provided they be treated and cured at the immigration hospital, and at their own expense. Asian applicants thus incurred additional expenses and delays in the process.

The Interrogation

Any question about an applicant’s eligibility to enter the country resulted in a hearing before the Board of Special Inquiry, which consisted of two inspectors, one of whom acted as chair, an interpreter (if necessary), and a stenographer. European applicants, such as Germans, Greeks, Spaniards, Italians, and the British were briefly interrogated about their financial situation, occupational background, and contacts in America, and were generally admitted within a day or two. The same was true of Japanese and Korean picture brides, but not of the Chinese. Because immigrant inspectors suspected that many Chinese immigrants were circumventing the Chinese exclusion laws by coming as “paper sons” or “paper daughters,” falsely claiming to be family members of the exempt classes (merchants and U.S. citizens), they subjected them to intensive interrogations that could last three or four days.

Only Chinese merchants were asked to provide detailed documentation of their business activities and volume of merchandise, a list of all partners, and two white witnesses to testify on their behalf. Chinese claiming to be wives or children of U.S. citizens or merchants were asked detailed questions about their family history, relationships, living arrangements, and everyday life in the village:

- “What are the birth and death dates of your grandparents? Where are they buried?”
- “Who lives in the third house in the fourth row of houses in your village?”
- “Of what material is the ancestral hall built?”
- “How often did your father [or husband] write and how much money did he send home?”
- “How many guests were at your wedding? What jewelry did your husband give you as wedding presents?”

These questions, designed to confirm their identities, relationships, and immigration statuses, were also asked of their witnesses. Any significant discrepancy in the answers of an applicant and witness could mean exclusion and deportation. So unreasonable were the
questions that even true sons, daughters, and wives were known to have failed the exam. In essence, the interrogation itself exceeded its stated purpose and worked as a discriminatory practice against Chinese applicants since no other group was subjected to the same process.

In preparation for the interrogation, Chinese applicants, regardless of whether their claims for admission were legitimate or fraudulent, learned to memorize coaching information provided to them by immigration brokers months before the voyage. If their memories should fail them during an interrogation, or if wrong answers were given, a way was found to smuggle coaching information into the detention barracks, either in food and gift packages sent from San Francisco or through the Chinese kitchen staff who were willing to stop by certain stores in Chinatown on their days off to pick up coaching notes. For a small fee, they would smuggle the messages into the station and pass them at mealtimes to officers of the Self-Governing Association, a mutual aid organization that was formed by Chinese detainees in 1918.

Chinese immigrants were usually provided with Chinese interpreters. Many of the interpreters were college graduates who spoke a number of Chinese dialects and who had come highly recommended by white missionaries or trustworthy citizens. The interpreters, however, had no decision-making power on the board, and to prevent any collusion between the applicant, witness, and interpreter, the board used a different interpreter for each session of the hearing. At the end of each session, the board chairman always asked the interpreter to identify the dialect being spoken to ascertain whether the applicant and witness claiming to be members of the same family were speaking the same dialect.

Corruption in the Immigration Service was pervasive throughout the country, and it was no different at Angel Island. Immigrant inspectors were known to accept bribes to render favorable decisions. One of the biggest scandals broke in 1917, when a federal grand jury exposed a smuggling ring that was netting hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Employees at Angel Island were caught stealing and manipulating Chinese records in connection with illegal entries. The grand jury indicted thirty people, including immigrant inspectors, lawyers, and Chinese immigration brokers. Twenty-five employees were dismissed, transferred, or forced to resign as a result of the investigation.

At the conclusion of the hearing, the board would decide whether to admit, exclude, or admit with conditions or bonds. All decisions, except for some medical conditions, could be appealed to the San Francisco commissioner of immigration, the commissioner-general of immigration in Washington, DC, and then the federal courts. Of all the immigrant groups on Angel Island, the Chinese were the most adept at taking advantage of the legal channels open to them, sparing no expense to hire the best white attorneys to represent them. According to immigration records, from 1910 to 1940, immigrant inspectors on Angel Island rejected 9 percent or 8,672 out of 95,687 Chinese applicants. Of these, 88 percent retained attorneys to appeal the decisions, and 55 percent of the appeals were successful.² In many cases, higher authorities found that the interrogation process at Angel
Island was unfair. Only 5 percent of all Chinese applicants ended up being deported, but because of the appeal process, at least 6,000 of them languished on Angel Island for more than a year before their cases were finally decided. That is why the Chinese made up 70 percent of the detainee population on Angel Island at any time.

While immigration officials primarily used the Chinese exclusion laws to regulate Chinese immigration into the country, they used the general immigration laws to screen out non-Chinese applicants who had contagious diseases, criminal records, or were likely to become public charges. To enforce the literacy clause of the 1917 Immigration Act, which required that all immigrants aged sixteen and over be able to read in their own language, test cards in thirty-six different languages were used. Renewed xenophobia after the United States entered World War I led to increased concern about the infiltration of spies and radicals at the country’s borders. Russian and German immigrants found themselves under intense scrutiny, and the Bureau of Immigration worked closely with other federal departments and local police departments to monitor, arrest, and deport alien radicals and anarchists. The passage of the 1921 Quota Act and 1924 Immigration Act required still more procedures on Angel Island and increased the already heavy staff workload. The quota law allowed 20 percent of the year’s allotment for each country to be used each month. Those who arrived after the quota for their particular country had been filled were faced with longer detentions, or worse, had to turn back.
Comparing Immigrant Experiences on Angel Island

Immigration records show that of the half million people who were detained on Angel Island between 1910 and 1940, the largest groups were approximately 85,000 Japanese, 50,000 Chinese, 8,000 South Asians, 8,000 Russians and Jews, 1,000 Koreans, and 1,000 Filipinos. Race and nationality continued to be determining factors in the different treatment of immigrants on Angel Island—how they were scrutinized by immigration officials, the quality of food they were served, the comfortable or overcrowded conditions of their housing accommodations, and privileges such as visiting rights and exercise time that were accorded to some and not others. Most telling was the difference in detention time and deportation rates, which reflected immigration policies that privileged whites over Asians, and Japanese over other Asian groups.

Immigrants from South Asia had the hardest time getting into the country. They were primarily Sikhs and single men from the Punjab districts of present-day India and Pakistan who had left their homes to escape British colonialism and to seek a better livelihood abroad. Targeted for exclusion by anti-Asian activists and immigration restrictionists, South Asians had the highest rejection and deportation rate of all immigrants, even though there was no law that specifically excluded them until 1917. In 1910, Commissioner-General of Immigration Daniel Keefe, feeling the pressure from the Asiatic Exclusion League, ordered Angel Island inspectors to exclude “East Indians” as a whole on the basis that they were persons of poor physique and likely to become public charges (LPC) because of discrimination against them in the labor market. From 1911 to 1915, 55 percent of all South Asian applicants for admission were rejected, some because they had hookworms or some other kind of contagious disease, but most because they were deemed LPC. The majority were detained for eight to fourteen days. Very few of them had the financial resources to appeal the decisions. Moreover, there were no strong ethnic organizations of their own to assist them, and the British government, which ruled over India, was not willing to defend their rights. On the contrary, because many of the immigrants supported the Gadar Party’s efforts to overthrow British colonial rule, many South Asians already in the country came under scrutiny by Angel Island officials who cooperated with U.S., Canadian, and British officials to arrest and deport them from the United States.

In contrast, Japanese immigrants had the shortest stay and the lowest rate of deportation (less than 1 percent) among all immigrants. Japan was a powerful nation at the time, having defeated China and Russia in two separate wars, and was able to forestall Congress from passing a Japanese exclusion law. The Japanese government negotiated the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907–1908, in which they agreed to stop issuing passports to Japanese laborers. The agreement also permitted Japanese aliens in the United States to send for their wives and children; a privilege denied Chinese laborers under the Chinese Exclusion Act. Drawn to Hawaii and the United States by the promise of jobs and wealth, the overwhelming majority of Japanese immigrants, including ten thousand picture brides, came armed with passports and marriage and birth records proving their right to enter the country, and were admitted within a day or two of their arrival. At the worst, those found with hookworms had to stay on Angel Island for two or three weeks to undergo treatment.
However, Japanese immigration came to an end with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, when Congress decided to add the clause barring all aliens ineligible to citizenship. From then on, only U.S. citizens, returning residents, and temporary visitors were admitted into the country.

Overall, the treatment of Russians and Jews on Angel Island was very similar if not better than that of their counterparts on Ellis Island. Journeying east across Siberia, China, Japan, and the Pacific to reach San Francisco, this diverse group of immigrants included Jews, Baptists, Molokans, and Mennonites who were fleeing religious persecution and military service; farmers, laborers, and tradesmen seeking better economic opportunities; soldiers, aristocrats, professionals, and intellectuals escaping political persecution under the new Soviet regime; and Jewish refugees seeking a safe haven from Nazism. Those who arrived as refugees with little or no money were often barred from landing on grounds that they were LPC. Hundreds were detained for weeks at the immigration station while they appealed exclusion decisions. But with ethnic and religious organizations like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to assist them, their appeals seldom failed. Many were scrutinized for their political views, but few were actually deported because of them. The average stay for Russians and Jews on Angel Island was two to three days, and less than 2 percent were deported in the end. The deportation rate for their counterparts at Ellis Island was twice as high. However, those who arrived after Congress passed the Quota Act of 1921 found their nationality to be a liability. Many were detained for months while waiting for their country’s quota to open up.

Other accounts indicate that Australians and New Zealanders might have received preferential treatment and were not always subject to the restrictions of the quota laws. In July 1921, orders were passed down to San Francisco from Washington, DC, that all aliens from Australia and New Zealand should be landed expeditiously, “regardless of quota.” As a result, twenty-seven Australians were landed on personal bonds of $500, while twenty-five Assyrian refugees, who had come by way of Japan after escaping slaughter by Muslims in Persia, were detained on Angel Island for over a year because their country’s quota had been used up and they did not have the funds to post bonds.

The official records provide ample evidence that immigration officials looked favorably upon immigrants of all racial backgrounds who demonstrated “refinement,” wealth, and status. Mexican and South Asian applicants who showed bank statements or property deeds, for example, could convince immigration officials that they were members of the middle, rather than laboring, class. Many immigrants arriving from Guatemala through Angel Island in the early 20th century were wealthy, well-connected people who were coming for vacation, education, or permanent residence. With supporting letters from the Guatemalan consul general and ample funds in their bank accounts, they were readily admitted. Temporary visitors denied admission for minor infractions under the immigration laws could also be admitted on bond, pledging to return to their home country after the
time allotted for their visit had expired, but these bonds were expensive and thus available only to those with sufficient funds.

In contrast, working-class immigrants were often excluded from the country because immigration officials considered them “likely to become a public charge.” The vague definition of the LPC category made it an effective tool with which to exclude a broad range of people. An LPC decision not only implied that applicants were currently unable to support themselves but also that they would not be able to support themselves in the future. Thus, immigrant inspectors routinely measured an immigrant’s appearance, skill set, and work history against the current labor market, racial attitudes, and more. In this way, appearance was used as evidence of poverty in the present and in the future. Those who were aware of this class bias in America’s immigration laws took precautions to disguise their economic status and to bring $50 in cash as “show money.”

Immigration officials also treated female arrivals differently from males. Immigration policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Gentlemen’s Agreement explicitly allowed Chinese and Japanese women to enter the country only as dependents to a husband or father. All female applicants were subjected to gender-based policies that favored the admission of valuable laborers (mostly men) and “respectable” women who conformed to middle-class standards of domesticity. Working-class women were at a clear disadvantage under these terms. Those traveling alone were routinely excluded as LPC. Those traveling with husbands who were suspected of not being able to support their families were also excluded. Whether a woman was capable of supporting herself and her family was irrelevant.

Women from all countries encountered a gendered immigration inspection process, whereby immigration officials held them to higher moral standards than their male counterparts. Female applicants were subjected to interrogations that included personal, invasive questioning about their moral behavior and sexual activities. In contrast, the same type of questioning or level of invasiveness was rarely applied to male applicants. Immigrant women were especially vulnerable to exclusions based on crimes of moral turpitude, which had been defined by a federal district court in 1913 as an “act of baseness, vileness, or depravity.” The Bureau of Immigration included a wide range of behaviors as immoral, including perjury, indictment for murder, and conviction of criminal libel. But the realm of immigrants’ private sexuality came under the most scrutiny. Fornication, premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality were all listed as cause for exclusion. Women suspected of having premarital or extra-marital sexual relations with men prior to their arrival in the United States were commonly excluded as committing crimes of moral turpitude, whereas the sexual behaviors of male immigrants was largely irrelevant in the eyes of the government.
In Detention

Life in detention tended to follow a mundane routine of endless waiting that was occasionally interrupted by periods of anxiety, even terror. But again, detainees’ experiences on Angel Island differed. Non-Asian detainees described the conditions at the station as tolerable when the barracks were not overcrowded. A group of Russian students, who were stuck on Angel Island for three months in 1923 because of the quota laws, wrote home about their spacious quarters, the good food, visits with friends, and the musical concerts and plays they were allowed to perform at the immigration station. Smaller rooms for “special cases” and first-class female passengers were also available, at least for some years. One Canadian family looked upon their four-month detention in 1930 as a welcome respite from the harsh Canadian winter and the usual toil of work.

In contrast, Chinese detainees, who faced both higher rates of exclusion and longer detention periods than other groups, chafed at the injustices they experienced. In interviews conducted decades after their detention on Angel Island, detainees recalled, often emotionally and angrily, the feelings of frustration and hopelessness that characterized their time on the island. They were confined to the barracks except for meals and two exercise periods daily. Only the women could go for walks under guard. In addition to the discomfort of confinement, the dormitories themselves were extremely crowded and unsanitary, and posed fire hazards. Rows of rods supporting three tiers of metal bunks lined the rooms. When fully occupied, there was hardly any room to move.

One of the detainees’ biggest sources of complaint concerned the poor quality and lack of variety of food served in the dining facilities. Meals took place in the dining rooms located in the administration building and connected to the detention barracks by a covered stairway. Like other aspects of the immigration station, food service was also strictly regulated by racial segregation. Four dining rooms occupied the entire south wing of the administration building’s second floor. One public dining room, one officers’ dining room, a European dining room, and the Chinese and Japanese dining room separated detainees from immigration officials and visitors and also segregated the detainees by race. Amenities also differed. The European dining room had tablecloths; the Asian dining room did not.

Both immigrants and immigration officials agreed that the quality of the food offered to the detainees was generally poor all around. European detainees complained that their food was served cold and had no variety. Seventeen Russian Jews refused to eat the non-kosher food during Passover week. In 1915, Japanese women detainees cried when they told a visiting social worker about the food served to them on the island. Chinese detainees flatly called the food inedible, and two food riots erupted over food, in 1919 and 1925. Moreover, the dining rooms were unsanitary. The tables, chairs, and dishes were dirty, often with caked-on food from many previous meals.
The poor food quality, especially for Asian detainees, was a result of racial inequality at the immigration station. The government required that the private firms hired to prepare all meals for the immigration station staff and detainees spend less on meals for Asian detainees than for Europeans or staff members. In 1909, concessionaires were allotted 14 cents per meal for Asian detainees, 15 cents per meal for European detainees, and 25 cents for employee meals. There was also a vast difference in the variety of food offered to detainees. This was partly to accommodate different palates and diet preferences, but the specific menus and cost requirements set by the government resulted in a disparity in the quality and variety of food. The fact that the kitchen was equipped with steamers instead of woks did not help matters. “They just steamed the food till it was a like a soupy stew,” recalled one Chinese detainee. “After looking at it, you’d lose your appetite.” The lucky ones had relatives in San Francisco who sent them tasty deli food, sausages, dim sum, and fresh fruits. Those with a little cash could also buy snacks at the small concession in the dining room.

With such poor quality meals and little distractions, the monotonous routine and the endless waiting took its toll, especially on the Chinese, who had the longest detentions and highest rate of suicides (at least half a dozen reported cases). Many Chinese male detainees found ways to occupy their time gambling, reading newspapers, and listening to phonograph records. Some expressed their frustrations through poetry written or carved into the barracks walls. Recreation time in the small, fenced, outdoor yards allowed them to enjoy some sunlight and fresh air. Once a week, detainees were escorted down to the storehouse on the dock to retrieve personal items from their luggage. In contrast, the women passed the time sewing, knitting, reading, attending English classes, and going for walks under guard. Non-Chinese detainees were allowed to see friends and attorneys on Saturdays and relatives on Sundays, whereas Chinese immigrants were not granted visiting rights until after their cases had been settled.

Other visitors to Angel Island included missionaries and representatives of immigrant and social service organizations who provided religious services, occasional cultural programs, and comfort and assistance to distressed immigrants. Missionaries from the mainland began to visit the station soon after it opened. The most influential missionary at the immigration station was Methodist deaconess Katharine Maurer, who was known as the “Angel of Angel Island.” For twenty-eight years, she took the ferry every day from San Francisco to the immigration station to distribute religious teachings, hold English classes and Christmas parties, and visit both men and women in the barracks and in the hospital. In addition, she served as interpreter for German speakers during the interrogations and as witness in the American weddings required of Japanese picture brides until 1917.

Other organizations, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), assisted Katharine Maurer in her work at the station. The DAR established an emergency fund and contributed boxes of clothing, books, toys, wool and knitting needles, fabric to make clothes, and a radio. The YMCA and YWCA sent staff and volunteers to the station to teach detainees about American customs; provide reading materials, movies, games, and recreational equipment; and perform small services for the detainees. Ethnic organizations and religious institutions such as the Chinese Six Companies, Japanese Association of
America, Korean National Association, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Mennonite Church, and Sikh Temple were all instrumental in advocating for improved conditions at the immigration station and providing material and legal assistance to shorten the detainees’ stay on Angel Island. The combined efforts of these outside groups helped to alleviate the monotony of detention, provided an important connection to life off the island, and for those who were eventually admitted into the country, helped immigrants make the transition to America.

It could take several hours or several months for the U.S. government to make a final decision about whether to admit or exclude an applicant for admission. For those who were admitted, Angel Island became the gateway that opened up to new lives in America. For those who were excluded, the island represented an impenetrable wall barring them from families, work, and the promise of riches or freedom on the other side. Whether admitted or deported, the time on Angel Island was memorable for many. Over the years, detainees, social workers, immigration officials, and visitors recorded their recollections in interviews, personal collections, autobiographies, and official documentation. Many of these stories can be found in Yung and Lee’s book, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* or online at the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation.

Some detainees expressed themselves by writing or carving their names, the dates of their detention, or other thoughts and feelings onto the walls of the immigration station itself. Hundreds of Chinese poems bear witness to the harsh treatment suffered by Chinese detainees, but they are also evidence of resistance, perseverance, and nationalist sentiments in the face of adversity. Carved into the barracks walls of the detention building is one poem written by a Chinese detainee on the eve of his deportation back to China. He expressed his hopes that fellow detainees from his native village would remember their time together. But the poem also stands as a testament to how close the author came to a new life in the United States:

> For half a year on Island, we experienced both the bitter and the sweet
> We only part now as I am being deported
> I leave words to my fellow villagers that when they land,
> I expect them to always remember the time they spent here.

### Angel Island’s Legacy

In 1940, a fire destroyed the administration building, and the immigration station was moved back to the mainland. The island site reverted to the U.S. Army, and during World War II, it was used for processing and housing American troops, German and Japanese prisoners of war, and enemy aliens bound for inland camps. In 1963, Angel Island formally became part of the state park system, and the abandoned and dilapidated buildings were
slated for demotion. Fortunately in 1970, park ranger Alexander Weiss came upon hundreds of Chinese poems on the walls of the detention building and had the foresight to alert the Asian American community to his discovery.

Over the next forty years, community activists and descendants of Angel Island detainees recovered the poetry and history of immigration through Angel Island, successfully lobbied for National Historic Landmark status, secured funds to restore the site, and embarked on a massive preservation project to transform the site into a museum that would call attention to Angel Island as a symbol of America’s history of racial exclusion and as a site of conscience and reconciliation for the nation.

In 1943, Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act as a good-will gesture to China, an ally to the U.S. in World War II. Chinese aliens were finally able to become U.S. citizens, but only 105 Chinese were admitted into the country each year. Other Asian immigrants were not granted the same privilege until after World War II. It was not until Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1965 that the last vestige of racism was removed from our immigration laws and thousands upon thousands of Asian immigrants were admitted based on a preference system that favored family reunification and skilled and professional labor. The broken immigration system was finally fixed. In 2012, on the 130th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Congress saw fit to pass a resolution expressing regret for the discriminatory laws that had resulted in the persecution and political alienation of persons of Chinese descent.

Lest we forget, from its founding, the United States has benefited from the skills, ideas, capital, labor, creativity, and values that immigrants have brought to this country. Immigration is critical to our economy, families, and communities. It is also a central component of our national identity. As we continue to debate the role of immigration in 21st-century America, we would do well to heed the lessons of Angel Island—of what can go wrong when a nation’s immigration policies do not live up to its democratic ideals of liberty and justice for all.

**Discussion of the Literature**

Very little was known or written about the Angel Island Immigration Station until park ranger Alexander Weiss called attention to the Chinese poems on the walls of the detention barracks in 1970. In an effort to save the poetry and restore the immigration site, Asian American community activists, descendants of former detainees, scholars, and preservationists began researching its history and lobbying for its preservation. Some of the earliest articles on the subject were written by Him Mark Lai and Connie Young Yu and published in *East West Chinese American Journal, San Francisco Journal, Bridge Magazine, California History,* and *Amerasia.*
In 1980, Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung teamed up to write and self-publish *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*. The book includes a historical introduction, 135 poems in Chinese and English translation, excerpts from 39 oral history interviews, and 22 photographs of the period. Many of the poems, which are no longer legible on the walls, came from the notebooks of Tet Yee and Smiley Jann, who were detained on Angel Island in the early 1930s. The second edition of *Island* was published by the University of Washington Press, in 2014. In addition to the original 135 poems, it includes Chinese poems that had been found on the walls of the immigration stations at Ellis Island and Victoria, B.C., an expanded historical introduction based on new research, twenty full profiles of former detainees and employees, and over one hundred photographs of the immigration station and the people associated with the place.

During the years between the two editions of *Island*, there have been much new research and many publications about the Angel Island immigration story. Of particular importance are the following: Erika Lee’s *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*, which is based on the Chinese exclusion files and immigration records at the National Archives; Nayah Shah’s *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*, which includes a chapter on public health issues and medical practices at Angel Island; Estelle Lau’s *Paper Families: Identity, Immigration, Administration, and Chinese Exclusion*, an expose on the paper son immigration strategy and the Confession Program; Robert Barde’s *Immigration at the Golden Gate: Passenger Ships, Exclusion, and Angel Island*; Mae M. Ngai’s *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, which focuses on the legal regime of restriction in the 1920s; John Soennichsen’s *Miwoks to Missiles: A History of Angel Island*, including the immigration station; Erika Lee and Judy Yung’s comprehensive history, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*; and Roger Daniels’s article, “No Lamps Were Lit for Them: Angel Island and the Historiography of Asian American Immigration.” Two noteworthy studies on Chinese American literature that include an analysis of the Angel Island poems are: Steven Yao’s *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* and Yin Xiao-huang’s *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*.


Major Master’s theses and PhD dissertations about Angel Island immigration include: ; ; ; and .

Moreover, in their efforts to restore the immigration station as a National Historic Landmark and museum of Pacific immigration, the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation and the California Department of Parks and Recreation commissioned Daniel Quan Designs and the Architectural Resources Group to conduct major feasibility studies on the immigration station’s buildings, cultural artifacts, history, and grounds. They also hired a team of Chinese scholars to do a comprehensive study of all the poems and
inscriptions on the walls: “Poetry and Inscriptions: Translation and Analysis.” The various reports from these studies provide new and extensive information about the history and wall inscriptions of the Angel Island Immigration Station.

**Primary Sources**

The National Archives at San Francisco holds the largest collection of immigration records related to the history and operation of the Angel Island Immigration Station. Of particular importance are the following Record Groups:

- **RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States**: contains court records of admiralty, civil, and criminal case files. Of special interest are the thousands of case files relating to habeas corpus actions that contested the Chinese exclusion actions of Federal immigration officials.
- **RG 36, Records of the U.S. Customs Service**: contains correspondence received and sent by the Secretary of the Treasurer pertaining to the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Acts.
- **RG 85, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service**: contains arrival investigation case files; Chinese partnership case files; case files of investigations involving deportation; return certificate application case files of Chinese departing; and administrative records, including general correspondence, historical files, and construction and maintenance files; and microfilmed records of Chinese mortuary records, certificates of identity for Chinese residents, registrar of Chinese departure case files, passenger lists of Chinese, daily records of applications for return certificates, indexes of Chinese partnership case files, minutes of Boards of Special Inquiry, passenger lists of vessels arriving in San Francisco, registers of Chinese laborers returning, lists of Chinese passengers arriving in San Francisco, and lists of Chinese applying for admission. (Some of these microfilmed records have been indexed, scanned, and made available at Ancestry.com). A few annual reports of the San Francisco Commissioner of Immigration and all annual reports of the Commissioner-General of Immigration are available at the San Francisco branch.
- **RG 90, Records of the Public Health Service**: contains correspondence and general administrative files of the Angel Island Quarantine Station relating to fumigation and disinfection of vessels and cargo, immigration hospital operations, medical examinations of immigrant aliens, quarantine procedures, and administrative matters.

The National Archives in Washington, DC hold additional records and photographs relating to the Angel Island Immigration Station: general correspondence files (RG 85), central office subject correspondence and case files (RG 85, Entry 9), administrative files of the Public Health Service (RG 90), and subject correspondence files relating to Asian
immigration and exclusion (Series A), which are also available on microfilm at the San Francisco branch.

The Ethnic Studies Library at the University of California, Berkeley, has the largest Chinese American archival collection in the country. Primary sources about Angel Island include transcripts of interviews with former Chinese detainees that were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (Angel Island Oral History Project); research materials used by Him Mark Lai in his publications about Angel Island (Him Mark Lai Papers); and major Chinese language newspapers on microfilm. For finding aids and online digitalized items, go to Online Archives of California.

The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, has the following research materials about the Angel Island Immigration Station: Angel Island interviews with former detainees, Hart Hyatt North Papers, John Birge Sawyer Diaries, and photographs. For finding aids and online digitalized items, go to Online Archives of California.

The Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF), founded in 1983 to preserve and restore the immigration station and educate others about its history, has the following research materials in their collection: past and current feasibility studies and interpretive plans by the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee, California Department of Parks and Recreation, and Architectural Resources Group; oral history recordings and transcripts of interviews conducted by volunteers for AIISF and by the authors of both Island and Angel Island; and historical and contemporary photographs. Its website has a link, Immigrant Voices, to numerous stories, oral histories, and videos created by staff or submitted by volunteers and relatives of former detainees.

The California Department of Parks and Recreation is the primary source for a number of feasibility studies and interpretive plans past and present; transcripts of interviews with former Chinese detainees that were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s; and many historical photographs of the Angel Island Immigration Station.

The San Francisco Public Library has the largest collection of San Francisco newspapers in the country; the annual reports of the Commissioner-General of Immigration and the annual reports of the Surgeon-General of the Public Health Services; and newspaper clippings and photographs of the Angel Island Immigration Station in its San Francisco History Center.

Further Reading


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Notes:

(1.) See Table 1 in the Appendix of Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, 327–328.


(3.) Interview with Mrs. Wong by Genny Lim and Judy Yung, August 15, 1976, San Francisco. Interview 3 (Mrs. Jew), Angel Island Oral History Project, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley.


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