

Rhetorical Implications of the Chinese Detainees' Ghostly Poems at Angel Island: Lonely Voices, Alien Discourse, and Collective Identity

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Abstract: February 15th, 2009, saw the reopening of the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco as a museum that showcases the sufferings of imprisoned Chinese immigrants who came to the west coast of the United States of America during the first half of the 20th century. Although many travelers or immigrants from East Asian countries and the eastern part of Russia were detained and roughed up when they arrived in San Francisco, by far the majority of the detainees were Chinese. Under the notoriously discriminating law known as "Chinese Exclusion Act" passed in 1882 and repealed in 1943, no fewer than 120,000 Chinese were held in Angel Island against their will between 1910 and the early 1940's, some of them for as long as two years. Different from their fellow detainees from Japan, Korea, or Russia, who registered their frustration and anger vocally or in short pieces of writing, the Chinese who were confined in Angel Island wrote poems instead and carved them on the walls of their bunk barracks. These poems, totaling over 150 and all written in Chinese, recorded a range of feelings the detainees experienced: fear, uncertainty, despair, loneliness, homesickness, indignation, defiance, and even contempt. In my presentation, I would like to categorize some of these poems by their themes, identify the emotions expressed in them, and analyze their structural patterns in the Chinese poetic discursive tradition. In so doing, I intend to establish a link among all these individual works of poetry written and inscribed in times of great distress and see how, as a very alien form of rhetorical practice to the average American reader, each of these poems contributed to the collective identity of Chinese emigrants to America in the early 20th century.

The people at Angel Island wrote poems all over the walls, wherever the hand could reach... You can't say the poems were great, but they expressed real feelings. They were works of the overseas Chinese and therefore part of the history of the overseas Chinese.

--Mr. Ng, age 15 in 1931 when detained on Angel Island (Lai *et al.* 136)

February 15th, 2009, saw the reopening of the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco as a museum that showcases the sufferings of imprisoned Chinese immigrants who came to the west coast of the United States of America during the first half of the 20th century. Although many travelers or immigrants from East Asian countries and the eastern part of Russia were detained and roughed up when they arrived in San Francisco, by far the majority of the detainees in the station were Chinese. Under the notoriously discriminating law known as "Chinese Exclusion Act" passed in 1882, no fewer than 120,000 Chinese were held in Angel Island against their will between 1910 and 1940, some of them for as long as two years.

They were kept there for two things. First, they were met with medical examinations to determine whether they had parasitic or other diseases, such as uncinariasis (hookworm), filariasis, and clonorchiasis (liver fluke). These were conditions that would mean sure and immediate deportation (Daniels, Lai *et al.* 15, Cynthia Wong, Zhang 66). Second, they were brought to lengthen interrogations for the verification of the authenticity about their legal documents. Since the Chinese Exclusion Act effectively put to an end any Chinese immigration into the United States, only immediate family members—spouses and children—were allowed entry to America. The 2006 San Francisco earthquake destroyed most of the immigration documents and gave the Chinese community an opportunity to bring relatives to America under the disguise of immediate family members. In some cases, earlier immigrants who had been naturalized before the Exclusion Act saw it as a window for business and made false claims with the U. S. Naturalization and Immigration Services to obtain papers that would permit entry for the number of children to entry the U. S. as they claimed. These people then went back to China to sell the papers. Families that bought such papers would then send to America their sons or daughters who would come with fake identities. In order to pass the close inspection and interrogation, these youngsters had to memorize every single detail about their assumed identities: their fake names, places where they were supposed to be born and raised, their close and distant relatives, their family members in America and so forth (Lai *et al.* 16-24, Cynthia Wong, Zhang 71-101. Also see Chang, Hsu, Lee, and Sau-liang Wong). It was this investigation process that kept most of the people detained for a considerable period of time, a time of anxiety, homesickness, regrets and a range of other emotions for them. The poems left on the barrack walls of the immigration center resulted from those emotions as well as from serious soul searching deep thinking.

Superficially, the sheer number of the Chinese detained and the lengths of their detainment might be the reason why the walls were covered with Chinese poems; a close examination of the cultural, educational, and rhetorical backgrounds from which the ethnically different immigrants came will reveal many other contributing factors that led them to behave differently during times of intense stress and distress. The Japanese detainees in the Angel Island, for instance, were said to resort to “*ganbaru*” and “*gaman*” [“hold out, hang on, work hard” and “patience, endurance, perseverance”] in order “to keep at it and preserve” (Lee and Yung 139). In their quiet form of self-preservation, the Japanese immigrants there left hardly any writing or carving, except for a few words that simply documented the time of their detainment or the home prefectures in Japan where they came from. Different from their fellow detainees from Japan, Korea, or Russia, who registered their frustration and anger vocally or quietly, the Chinese who were confined there wrote poems instead and carved them on the walls of their bunk barracks. These poems, totaling over 150 and all written in Chinese, recorded a range of feelings the detainees experienced: fear, uncertainty, despair, loneliness, homesickness, indignation, defiance, and even contempt. In this essay, I would like to categorize some of these poems by their themes, identify the emotions they express, and analyze their structural patterns in the Chinese poetic discursive tradition. In so doing, I intend to establish a link among all these individual works of poetry written and inscribed in times of great distress and see how, as a very alien form of rhetorical practice to the average American reader, each of these poems contributed to the collective identity of Chinese immigrants to America in the first half of the 20th century.

Civilizations all have their own rhetorical traditions. Some, such as the Greco-Roman classical rhetoric, focused almost exclusively on the oral use of language, with an emphasis on face-to-face persuasion, others, such as in the Hindu Vedas of ancient India, thrived on the internal use of silent language in the form of self-induced meditation (Everly and Lating 199). The Chinese in their antiquity were no exception. As one of the oldest peoples with a highly developed writing system and a vastly spread literacy, they had their rhetorical practice in a number of ways, all of which, arguably, hinged upon the written form of the language. In sharp contrast to their European and Southeastern Asian counterparts, Chinese before and during the times of Lao Tzu and Confucius were centrally interested in the communicative function and the rhetorical effectiveness of the written word. Moreover, poetic writing, of all forms of written discursive practices, was held in the highest esteem by the intelligentsias and the commoners alike in the Spring-Autumn and Warring-States periods of China, a time when Socrates and Plato were fiercely engaged in their battle against the sophists on the validity of rhetoric in reaching the truth. Unlike the Platonic poet whose private endeavor was supposed to be the second in superiority only to that of the philosopher and whose artistic pursuit might get him close enough to the truth over the superficial things of reality, the Chinese poet, at least the one defined and embraced by Confucius, was the one who stood artistic and aloof on the one hand, and on the other, proved himself as pragmatic as any other Chinese, with an education or without, even at that time. Poetry, therefore, had a very practical function. Instead of pursuing the intangible soul as the Platonic muse urged the inspired poet to do, the Chinese poems, or “poetic songs” as Confucius would call them, served to record the range of emotions in people’s everyday living, emotions of joy, happiness, love, anger, frustration, dissatisfaction, revolt, and so forth. Such poems, usually without any clear authorship, would be collected by government staff members, sent to the various levels of administrative offices, and analyzed in minute details in order to determine how ordinary people felt about their living conditions. Rulers diligent enough to check on such poetic writings and wise enough to react responsively saw their regimes flourish; others failed for doing precisely the opposite. Little wonder, then, poetry has been a favored form of writing that carries with it much rhetorical power for thousands of years to the Chinese. Rhetoricians throughout the dynasties, such as Lu Chi of Eastern Wu Dynasty and Liu Xie of the Qi-Liang Dynasties, both of whom being prominent poets themselves, explored the rhetorical as well as literary effects of different genres of poetry in their treatises: Lu Ji in *The Art of Writing*, and Liu Xie in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of the Dragon*. Poetry continued to flourish in times of high economic development and social and political stability. The Tang and Song Dynasties, for instance, witnessed the emergence of thousands of much celebrated poets such as Li Po, Du Fu, and Bai Ju-yi, whose works till this day are fondly recited by Chinese of all ages.

This grand old tradition of poetry as a privileged form of writing has thus become deeply rooted in the Chinese collective intellect. Its artistic, literary, and rhetorical values unquestioned and unchallenged, poetry for millennia has enjoyed the status of a much preferred genre of writing over others, occupying a prominent position in the curriculum for all levels of education. It was with such a profound reverence for poetry as the essence of their culture that many of the 120,000 “paper boys” and “paper girls”—so called because many claimed to be sons and daughters to naturalized Chinese Americans when in fact they only purchased those immigration documents or “papers” to gain entry to the U.S.—came ashore in San Francisco between 1910 and 1940.

Poetry, like any other form of writing, does not happen without a reason. The poems on the barrack walls in Angel Island resulted from intense emotions of frustration, shame, homesickness, hopelessness, anger, self-doubt, humiliation, and despair, all of which were commonly experienced among the Chinese detainees, with one type of emotion being the

prominent at a certain time over others. Due to the fear of being known as the authors of any of the poems, which might lead to instantaneous deportation, none of the poets left their names on the wall, although occasionally words like “someone from Taishan” or “en route to Mexico” might be spotted next a poem. This could be one of the reasons why they are known as “ghostly poems.” Other contributing factors to the total image of “ghostly” about the San Francisco immigration station at Angel Island include the horrifying suicides and the ensuing “visits” by the ghosts at night to haunt the place. One woman, for instance, stuck a sharp chopstick through her head, from one ear through to the other, upon hearing the denial of her entry and her pending deportation. Another detainee, a boy, stole out of the station at night to try to swimming across the bay, only to be drowned. The place thus became increasingly ghostly over the years. Today the word “ghostly” is a permanent descriptor of the island’s history.

Ghostly though they might be, these poems were written and/or carved by real Chinese immigrants who got detained there. And only the Chinese did so. They therefore uniquely reflect the cultural identity of the Chinese immigrants through this very special, almost esoteric rhetorical means of communication. The majority of the Chinese paper boys and girls being under 20 years of age, they came without any knowledge of the English language. In fact, all the interrogations done at the immigration station had to be carried out through the help of interpreters. Nevertheless, they seem to know much about poetry and appeared eager to write poems of their own whenever and wherever they could. As one such paper boy, Mr. Ng who was detained there in 1931 when he was merely 15, recalled later in an interview:

The people at Angel Island wrote poems all over the walls, wherever the hand could reach, even in the bathroom. Some were carved, but most were written in ink. There were many carved in the hall leading to the basketball court, because the wood there was softer. It was not easy finding space on the wall to compose a poem, so sometimes, when I thought of something lying in bed, I would bend over and write a poem under my bed, which was made of canvas. Sometimes, when someone didn’t like what another person wrote, he would deface the poem, saying “what a smart aleck, trying to write poetry like the others.” Sometimes people fought over poems. A lot of people there didn’t know how to write poetry. They weren’t highly educated, but they knew some of the rules of poetry. You can’t say the poems were great, but they expressed real feelings (Lai *et al.* 136).

The judgment of poetry being subjective, the artistic greatness or the lack thereof about these poems is a matter that I do not intend to address extensively. When we look at all the 150 plus poems on the barrack walls, we see repetition in theme, in diction, and in imagery. We also see poor rhyming and rhythm as well as substandard penmanship and calligraphy. Such weaknesses make one see Mr. Ng’s point about some of the poems not being great; but there are quite a number of well-wrought works that can measure well against some of the best poems in China’s poetic history. Some of the poems not only display structural elegance and stylistic brilliance, they also create vivid imagery and possess great depth in meaning. Take for instance Poem No. 46 in *Island* by Lai, Lim, and Yung, renumbered here as No.1.

1. 埃屋三椽聊保身，
 仓麓积愆不堪陈。
 待得飞腾顺逐日，
 铲除关税不论仁。

The three-beamed low room barely shelters the body.
 Yet the untold real stories here cannot be contained on the slopes of the Island.
 I am waiting for the day when luck falls on me.
 I will wipe out the immigration station without any hesitation.

This is a typical four-line Chinese poem in the 七言绝句 or “seven-word-per-line in a four-line structure” style. It follows the A A B A rhyming pattern very nicely. The images unfold from inside the low wooden room to the slopes in the outside, with the intangible “untold stories” acquiring physical bodies that build up and flow over the edges of the slopes. This imagined and exaggerated expansion of the detainees’ sufferings naturally gives rise to the expansion of the poet’s own resolve and determination to dismantle the immigration station when his lucky days arrive. The message is quite clear. Anyone able to read this poem in its Chinese original can see the poet’s anger over the maltreatment and his will to revenge. Likewise, one can just easily see the rhyming and rhythmic patterns of the poem, admire its brevity, and delight in its powerful and precise imagery. There is, however, something that subtly hidden from the reader. Vertically,

the first characters in each of the four lines together form a sentence that adds a great deal of significance to the them: 埃伦待铲， that is, “Angel Island awaits its finally leveling.” Such cross-line formation of sentences, phrases, and ideas is far less common than other features of Chinese poetry and very difficult to achieve. For that reason, it is considered highly stylized and of great poetic value if done appropriately and effectively. There is no doubt the poet here has succeeded beautifully in his effort. His achievement here ranks his poem among the best in Angel Island and elsewhere. Indeed there are quite a few excellent poems on the barrack walls whose poetic virtues alone deserve a concentrated study.

For this discussion, though, I will turn my attention to the messages being conveyed by the poems in order to highlight their rhetorical significance. These poems are indeed rhetorically powerful and very successful in getting the messages across to their intended audience. They document an experience that is highly unusual in the history of Chinese immigration to America and, for that matter, even more unusual as they jump over the immediate readers—those officers in the immigration station who could only understand English—to tell their stories to their fellow countrymen, to expose the disgrace of the U.S. immigration policies and practices, and to let the outside world know the horrible injustice they were subjected to while being detained there against their will. They register an array of emotions that resulted from the humiliation and frustration as they awaited their interrogations and the near arbitrary decisions over their admission or rejection. Patterns of thoughts and related emotions emerge when the poems are read carefully. Here I will focus on what I consider to be three major groups of poems that, respectively, highlight the immigrants’ dreams, expectations, and their initial shock; their listlessness, homesickness, and observations as they were confined at the island for month after month; and their despair, self-deliberation, and resolve to revenge as they woke up to the unbearable reality. While the poems that I have selected for this discussion are very limited in number, they should provide a general sense of the immigrants’ emotions about which the poems were written in the first place.

Poems on the Immigrants’ Dreams, Expectations, and Their Initial Shock

While there is no way to tell in precise terms when each of the poems were written and inscribed on the barrack walls, this group that reflects the immigrants’ dreams and their initial shock was believed to be among the first to appear. Prior to the opening of the Angel Island Immigration Station, “Chinese immigrants in difficulty with the immigration regulations were held in a ramshackle wooden two-story warehouse leased from the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and located at the end of a wharf on the San Francisco water front,” known as “the shed” (Daniels). Since the warehouse was far more temporary than the Angel Island facility, no written words on the walls there or anywhere else have been recorded. It was not until 1910 when Chinese immigrants were ferried to Angel Island and held there for the long and grueling sessions of interrogation did they start to carve poems in walls. The content of these first poems, one could imagine, would mix the poets’ high expectations of America with the shocking treatment they received as a rude awakening to a reality they were little prepared for. The three pieces below typify such poems. Poem No. 2—the original number in the book *Island* by Lai, Lim and Yung is provided in parentheses at the end of each poem in its Chinese original—contrasts the joy of leaving home and the happy voyage coming to America with the unbelievable lockup the poet was treated with. Poem No. 3 focuses on the lure of opulence in the new continent in the first two lines and then swiftly changes to the fact that, instead of getting gold and silver that he had come afar for, the poet finds himself using up all the family savings that he has brought with him, thus shaming his family in a way that no dutiful Chinese children are supposed to. Similarly, Poem No. 4 juxtaposes the two views the poet sees: the fancy high rise buildings on the mainland of San Francisco and the prison-like detention wooden structure in which he is locked. Two realities clash in his face to make him realize that giving up his life in China as a citizen there is a mistake and coming to America to seek a better life only makes him a foolish cow.

2. 家徒壁立始奔波，
浪声欢同笑呵呵。
埃伦念到闻禁往，
无非皱额奈天何？
(No. 2 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 35)

My excited rushing began from home as I left its bare walls.
The happy waves laughed with me in symphony.
Arriving on Angel Island, I heard I was forbidden to land,
What else could I do except frowning and feeling angry at heaven?

3. 美洲金银实可爱，
锥股求荣动程来。
不第千金曾用尽，
黧黑面目为家哉！
(No. 4 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 37)

The gold and silver of the American continent are so appealing
That, jabbing an awl into my thigh, I embarked on the journey for glory.
Now with my thousand pieces of gold completely gone,
I am so blacken-faced for having shamed my family.

4. 国民不为甘为牛，
意至美洲作营谋。
洋楼高耸无缘住，
谁知栖所是监牢？
(No. 8 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 41)

Instead of remaining a citizen of China, I willingly became an ox;
I intended to come to America to earn a good living.
The fancy buildings are lofty, but I have no chance to live in them;
How would anyone ever know that I'd find myself in a prison?

Poems on the Immigrants' Listlessness, Homesickness, and Observations

The next three poems describe the elongated agony that the detainees had to endure. Poem No. 5 chooses a very special time, the last day of winter and the eve of the new spring, to emphasize the passage of time, of one year replacing the other, of the going of the old and coming of the new. Since the year of the poem is not known, this special day could fall either before or after the Chinese New Year's Day, the most celebrated holiday in China, and also the saddest day for family members unable to get together. Technically a five-word-per-line four-line poem, known as 五言绝句 as opposed to the seven-word-per-line poems we have so far seen, this poem accomplishes a lot in twenty words. With a very simple diction, the poet states the fact that one year has come to an end and a new year is to begin the next day in the first two lines. The third just comments on the change of times. The climax falls on the last line: the person confined in the wooden building is being killed by sadness that has been years in the making.

5. 今日为冬末，
明朝是春风。
交替两年景，
愁煞木楼人。
(No. 12 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 53)

Today is the last day of winter,
Tomorrow is the vernal equinox.
One year's prospects have changed to another,
Sadness kills the person in the wooden building.

If sadness in Poem No. 5 is brought about by the long passage of time, the same sadness in Poem No. 6, also a twenty-word one, is highlighted by foregrounding the physical surroundings of the immigration barracks. The poet singles out sound as a sensory appeal. Then endless chirping of the insects from everywhere outside of the wooden detention center is clearly driving the persona insane and making him sigh helplessly with his fellow inmates. The collective sighing and the insects' incessant chirping converge to render the poet's homesickness increasingly unbearable. In despair and helplessness, he can do nothing except shedding endless tears that wet his clothing.

6. 四壁虫叽叽，
居人多叹息。
思及家中事，
不觉泪沾滴。
(No. 15 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 55)

As insects chirp outside the four walls,
The inmates continue to sigh again and again.
With thoughts constantly on my home far away,
Unconscious tears swell and wet my clothing.

Poem No. 7 likewise depicts the same sadness because of the long detainment, or “imprisonment” as the poet implies through his allusion to King Wen, the founder of the Zhou State (1154-1122 B.C.). King Wen was captured his enemy, the king of the Shang Dynasty, and was subsequently imprisoned in the town of Youli. The poet of this particular piece is one of the most educated not only because of his aforementioned historical allusion, but also because of a series of images that gives vivid details of what he has to endure there at the Angel Island detention center. The “fur and linen” garments in line two, the “bellyful” of discontent, and “bamboo slips” from Nanyao for inscription of writing in line three, and the loss of time in the “falling snow” and “wilting flowers” in line four all add up to make his sadness like “thousand-year old sorrow.”

7. 羑里受囚何日休？
裘葛已更又一秋。
满腹牢骚南徯竹，
雪落花残千古愁。
(No. 20 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 57)

[Like King Wen's] imprisonment at Youli, when will it ever end?
Fur and linen garments have been changed –yet another autumn has arrived.
My bellyful of discontent is too much to be transcribed on the Nanyao bamboo slips,
Snow falls and flowers wilt, but my sorrow remains forever.

Poems on the Immigrants' Discontent, Reflection, and Resolve to Revenge

The last poems represent a group that expresses the immigrants' growing discontent, their painful reflection on the way they have been treated, and their determination to fight back for justice.

8. 寄语同居勿过忧，
且把闲愁付水流；
小受折磨非是苦，
破伦曾被岛中囚。
(No. 60 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 125)

This is a message to those who will live here not to worry excessively.
Instead, you must cast your idle concerns aside.
Experiencing a little ordeal is no big deal--
Napoleon was once a prisoner on an island.

The poet of No. 8 above seems to have come to terms with the harsh reality of untold injustice. In a calm voice, he tells those who will come to be detained in the same quarters that there is no need to worry or despair. All great men suffer injustice and excessive misfortune, including Napoleon. By implication, he wants his fellow detainees to tough it out. And only by so doing can they become successful like Napoleon. Poem No. 9 expresses the same determination for

eventual success, but does so not by means of endurance as being called for by the poet of No. 8. Rather he wants to resort to violence in order to kill the “white barbarians.”

9. 留笔除剑到美洲，
 谁知道此泪双流？
 倘若得志成功日，
 定斩胡人草不留！
 (No 34 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 85)

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

Poem No. 10 goes one step further. By hoping that the Chinese revolution armies would succeed in overthrowing the government and that China’s industries would be strong enough to build many warships, the poet here dreams of a time when the Chinese military would actually sail across the Pacific to America and wipe out every white man. The “revolutionary armies” here could be in reference to the joint military forces lead by the Nationalist Party during the “North Expedition” war or 北伐战争 of 1926 to 1928. Although lacking in poetic artistry—even the rhyming is inconsistent among the four lines—Poem No. 10 is one of the most radical in its message.

10. 万望革军成功竣，
 维持祖国矿物通。
 造多战舰来美境，
 灭尽白人誓不休。
 (No 41 in Lai, Lim, and Yung 90)

My ten-thousand hopes are that our revolutionary armies will soon succeed
 and the mining of resources in our homeland will keep our industries flourish.
 They will build many battleships to sail to America
 to keep fighting for us until the last white person is annihilated.

Conclusion

Radical as it may seem, poems like the last one are not all together uncommon at Angel Island. The radical stance they express resulted not only from the terrible treatment in the immigration station there, but from the century-long suspicion, distrust, rejection, and discrimination by the United States government that set up all those discriminatory policies fostered practices of the same kind. This is where the poets achieve their intended rhetorical effects: to arouse sympathy and to get recognition of their fight for justice through their poetic works. Collectively, these poems create a powerful image and give a detailed account of the immigrants’ experience. Reading these poems, one gets the impression that “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” (Hom 135). Furthermore, these poems, ironically, “rail in the face of the mainstream American stereotype of ‘Asian silence.’ Given the [rhetorical] directness of the poetry, it is not surprising that Chinese immigrants fought unceasingly... for equality in consideration for citizenship” (Polster). Perhaps lonely voices at the time when they were written and inscribed on the barrack walls at Angel Island, these ghostly Chinese poems as a very alien form of written discourse did create a powerful collective identity, one that has stood out for all Chinese who fought their way to America in the early 20th-century. As such, these poems have contributed significantly to the Chinese-ness of generations of Chinese immigrants. That’s precisely where their unique rhetorical values lie.

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