

I Ask Heaven Whether It Knows of My Plight? - Research on the History of American Chinese Immigrants during the Chinese Exclusion Period on the Basis of the Poems of Angel Island

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The Chinese Exclusion Act implemented in 1882 left a major and indelible impact on Chinese Americans. In this research, I examine the poetry written by Chinese immigrants detained from a historical perspective to understand and unearth the hardship and injustice these immigrants experienced on Angel Island in the early 20th century.

Overseas-Chinese Americans contributed their life to the economic development and built the western United States, however, they were excluded from mainstream society. Because of competition for jobs, Chinese immigrants were looked down upon and regarded with hostility by American white people. Based on above, the American government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the first law in U.S. history to prevent a specific national group from migrating to the United States Under this Act, only the elite class—businessmen, diplomats, tourists, teachers, and students—were granted entry to the United States.

In 1906, when numerous birth certificates were destroyed by fire in the San Francisco earthquake, many Chinese immigrants took this opportunity to claim citizenship using a fraudulent American birth certificate, given that U.S. citizenship was granted to people born in U.S. territories. Taking advantage of this regulation, certain Chinese Americans sold the “vacancy” of their dependents to young people in China. With forged blood relation documents, young Chinese men and women could come to America, disguising as sons or daughters born abroad to U.S. citizens of Chinese heritage. For this reason, these illegal immigrants are referred to as “paper sons” or “paper daughters”.

To preclude illegal Chinese immigrants from entering into America, in 1910 the U.S. Immigration Office set up an immigration station on Angel Island, located in the San Francisco Bay. Upon arrival at San Francisco Bay, Chinese immigrants would be held on the Island for interrogation before being granted a VISA to the country or repatriated to China. Since detention could last for months, many detainees started to write or carve on the walls of the detention center to express their pain, anger, frustration, and hopeless.

My research probes into the poems were written by Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island, a literary legacy showing the trials and tribulations of immigration, to revisit this important chapter of the overseas-Chinese American history.

Key words: Angel Island, Poetry, Chinese Exclusion Act, paper son, Chinese-American