

## Carved on the Walls: Poetry by Early Chinese Immigrants

By Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim and Judy Yung

Excerpted from:  
ISLAND: POETRY AND HISTORY OF  
CHINESE IMMIGRANTS ON  
ANGEL ISLAND, 1910-1940  
(University of Washington Press, 1991).

When the Angel Island Immigration Station's doors shut in 1940, one of the bitterest chapters in the history of Chinese immigration to America came to a close. The poems expressing the thoughts of the Chinese immigrants detained at the station were locked behind those doors and forgotten, until they were discovered by park ranger Alexander Weiss in 1970 and preserved in *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940* (1980).

The Chinese began immigrating to America in large numbers during the California Gold Rush. Political chaos and economic hardships at home forced them to venture overseas to seek a better livelihood. Despite their contributions to America – building the transcontinental railroad, developing the shrimp and abalone fisheries, the vineyards, new strains of fruit, reclaiming swamplands, and providing the needed labor for California's growing agriculture and light industries – they were viewed as labor competition and undesirable aliens and were mistreated and discriminated against.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the inevitable culmination of a series of oppressive anti-Chinese laws and violent physical assaults upon the Chinese. For the first time in American history, members of a specific ethnic group – the Chinese – were refused entry. Only exempt classes, which included merchants, government officials, students, teachers, visitors, as well as those claiming U.S. citizenship, were admitted. The Angel Island Immigration Station was established in 1910 to process Chinese immigrants claiming citizenship and exempt statuses.

According to stories told by Chinese detainees, most immigrants went into debt to pay for passage to America. For those whose applications for entry were rejected, the wait could stretch as long as two years while they awaited



*Poetry on the barrack walls.*

appeals. Most of the debarred swallowed their disappointment and stolidly awaited their fate. However, some reportedly committed suicide in the barracks (editor's note: stories of suicide abound, but none have been confirmed in government records) or aboard returning ships. Still others vented their frustrations and anguish by writing or carving Chinese poems on the barrack walls as they waited for the results of appeals or orders for their deportation.

These poets of the exclusion era were largely Cantonese villagers from the Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong Province in South China. They were immigrants who sought to impart their experiences to countrymen following their footsteps. Their feelings of anger, frustration, uncertainty, hope and despair, self-pity, homesickness, and loneliness filled the detention barrack. Many of their poems were written in pencil or ink and eventually covered by coats of paint. Some, however, were first written in brush and then carved into the wood. The majority of the poems are undated and unsigned, probably for fear of retribution from the authorities.

All of the poems are written in the classical style, with frequent references or allusions to famous literary or heroic figures in Chinese legend and history, especially those who faced adversity. Because the early twentieth century saw an increasing national consciousness among the Chinese, many of the poems also voice resentment at being confined and bitterness that their weak motherland cannot intervene on their behalf. Most of the poems, however, bemoan the writer's own situation. A few are farewell verses written by deportees

or messages of tribulations by transients to or from Mexico and Cuba.

The literary quality of the poems varies greatly. The style and language of some works indicated that the poets were well versed in the linguistic intricacies of poetic expression, while others, at best, can only be characterized as sophomoric attempts. Since most immigrants at that time did not have formal schooling beyond the primary grades and for obvious reasons were usually not equipped with rhyme books and dictionaries, many poems violated rules of rhyme and tone required in Chinese poetry.

The poems occupy a unique place in the literary culture of Asian America. These immigrant poets unconsciously introduced a new sensibility, a Chinese-American sensibility using China as the source and America as a bridge to spawn a new cultural perspective. Their poetry is a legacy to Chinese Americans who would not be here today were it not for these predecessors' pioneering spirit. Their poetry is also a testimony to the indignity they suffered coming here.

The irony of exclusion was that it did not improve the white workingman's lot. Unemployment remained high and the wage level did not rise after the "cheap" competition had been virtually eliminated. As for the Chinese, their experiences on Angel Island and under the American exclusion laws, which were not repealed until 1943, laid the groundwork for the behavior and attitudes of an entire generation of Chinese Americans. The psychological scars – fear of officials, suspicion of outsiders, political apathy – still linger as a legacy in the Chinese-American community today.

## Commemorative T-Shirt

Proceeds from the sale of the commemorative t-shirt honoring Angel Island Immigration Station as a National Historic Landmark will go toward the docent training program for the Immigration Station. Please contact the Angel Island Association at (415) 435-3522 for more information.



*Wear a landmark! Specially designed for the Landmark event, these t-shirts are silkscreened in four colors and are 100% cotton. Available in adult sizes S, M, L, XL for \$12.00 and XXL for \$14.00 (plus sales tax and shipping).*

Would you like to plan a special visit to the Immigration Station? Please call AIA Volunteer Co-ordinator Ellen Loring at (415) 435-3522 and she will be happy to make the arrangements for your group.



Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation  
P.O. Box 29237  
San Francisco, CA 94129-0237

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# PASSAGES

## State Parks Interpreter II Hired For Immigration Station

On January 10, 2001, Darci Moore started her first day on the job as the State Parks Interpreter II for Angel Island State Park. As the State Parks Interpreter II, or Interpretive Program Coordinator as Moore more precisely describes her position, she will work with Angel Island State Park Superintendent Nicholas Franco and Tom Lindberg, Marin District Interpretive Specialist. In this newly created position, Moore, with the Angel Island Association, will continue standardization and development of the docent training program. She will team with AIISF, working closely with the Education Committee, to develop educational materials and implement committee recommendations. Additionally, she will create interpretive installations on and off the island that will guide people to the Immigration Station and explain its history and message to people unfamiliar with the story. Off island installation sites may include ferry terminals around the bay: Vallejo, Oakland and San Francisco.

Moore began her career with State Parks as a Park Aide and Volunteer Coordinator at Ano Nuevo State Reserve near Santa Cruz. After five years of employment there, she worked in the San Joaquin Valley as a Park Interpretive Assistant and Interpreter aiding field staff at various historic sites including Colonel Allinsworth State Historic Park, Fort Tejon State Historic Park, Millerton Lake State Recreation Area and the California State Mining and Mineral Museum. Moore's work there as an interpretive program manager, researching for cultural interpretation and managing collections, will serve her well as an Interpreter II which involves similar tasks.

Moore says she took the position at Angel Island to relate the story of the Immigration



*State Parks Interpreter II Darci Moore.*

Station to the present – to ask, “what important lessons learned at this site are still applicable today?” She notes that it is rare for an historic site to have a full time field interpreter assigned to it – a sign of the value State Parks places in the Immigration Station and its story. While most of these positions are limited to two-year terms, Moore's post is a full-time permanent position due to the long-term nature of the work ahead.

For now, Moore is busy “getting up to speed” on the history of the Immigration Station as well as the ongoing work at the site. In the short-term, she foresees replacing some of the interpretive panels currently installed and developing new brochures for outreach. Longer-term work that lies ahead includes developing a comprehensive interpretive plan for the Immigration Station site, furnishing and exhibit plans for the barracks and possibly for the hospital as well. Additionally, as reports for historic structures and cultural landscaping are finished later this year, Moore will work to develop and implement recommendations given.

AIISF welcomes Darci Moore to Angel Island and looks forward to working with her.

## AIISF Sponsors Holocaust Exhibit

AIISF is proud to be a sponsor of “Silent Voices Speak” an art exhibition and lecture series on the Holocaust and social injustice today. AIISF is excited to be involved with an event that, similar to AIISF's own mission and values, explores the consequences of racism and social injustice, and examines the lessons of the past to change the future.

“Silent Voices Speak” will be at Herbst International Exhibition Hall in the Presidio of San Francisco from April 1 through May 15. Two exhibitions will be featured: paintings based on archival photographs and a photographic exhibit honoring heroic individuals from many countries who saved a quarter of a million people. The lecture series explores themes ranging from historical perspectives on the Holocaust to discussions of present-day hate crimes and genocide. Lecturers include scholars, celebrities, civic leaders and survivors.

As a sponsor of “Silent Voices Speak,” AIISF has a special time slot reserved for a lecture and tour of the exhibit. On Sunday May 6, AIISF has a private tour scheduled at 12:15 p.m. followed by a lecture at 2:00 p.m. For those AIISF Friends interested in joining this tour and lecture, please call (415) 561-2160 or e-mail [info@aiisf.org](mailto:info@aiisf.org) to make your reservation. Please note spaces are limited and will be given on a first-come, first-served basis.

**Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation** is a non-profit organization whose primary goals are:

- a) to lead the effort to preserve, restore and interpret Angel Island Immigration Station, a National Historic Landmark, as the Pacific gateway for U.S. immigration; and
- b) to promote educational activities that further the understanding of Pacific Rim immigration in American history.

## President's Message



Incoming AIISF President Kathy Lim Ko with outgoing President Felicia Lowe.

Dear Friends:

Happy New Year and Happy Year of the Snake! It is my honor and privilege to be the new board president for AIISF. I follow in the very large footsteps of highly esteemed colleagues. The advances of the last few years couldn't have been made without the key leadership of past board presidents Daniel Quan and Felicia Lowe.

Felicia steps down from the board presidency to take an exciting opportunity in New York to produce and direct an episode in a new documentary series on the changing American identity. What a perfect opportunity for her. We are glad she is remaining on the board, but completely understand that it would be hard to serve as president from 3000 miles away.

2001 will be a period of planning for AIISF. Among the studies now underway are a poem documentation and conservation study which will identify all poems that can be found and the best methods for preserving them. As the newsletter article reports, the poetry is truly a unique resource. By the end of 2001, we will know the extent of the preservation work and will begin planning for it.

We will also conduct a strategic plan in 2001, especially in the area of educational programming. By reaching out locally and nationally, we hope to learn from the best and most cutting-edge programs. We want to use technology to reach people across the country.

At the same time, it is important for us to remember our roots. Who traveled through the Immigration Station? Whose stories can we discover and present for important lessons? How are these stories and lessons still relevant for us today? All of this work is as important as preserving the buildings at the Immigration Station. It is what breathes life into the place and gives it meaning.

We're very excited about looking into the future to set our path to preserve the Immigration Station and to share its lessons. We look forward to your continued support in these areas of preservation and education. We'll keep you posted!

With appreciation,  
Kathy Lim Ko

## In The News

### Message From Outgoing President Felicia Lowe

Happy New Year! The Year of the Snake marks a time of renewal for AIISF, in our commitment and in our leadership. This brief message will be my last as President of the Board of Directors.

As I look back at my tenure, I feel an enormous sense of pride at what we have accomplished together and a deep sense of gratitude for the trust and support I received from each member of the board, our staff, our park partners and you. It has been an incredibly satisfying experience – one which I will cherish the rest of my life – especially because it honors the memory of my father, grandfather, aunts and uncles who were detained on Angel Island.

I pass the President's gavel into the capable hands of Kathy Lim Ko. She is backed by a dynamite board. I have taken a leave of absence to produce a documentary on a PBS series called "Matters of Race" in New York. Please know my heart is with you...and as Arnold S. says, "I'll be back!"

Felicia

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### PASSAGES

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## In The News



Journalist William Wong.

### Yellow Journalist: William Wong on Asian America

An Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation friend and supporter, William Wong, has a new book that includes essays about the immigration station experience. The book is called *Yellow Journalist: Dispatches from Asian America* and is being published by Temple University Press. The book will be available in March 2001.

Wong is a veteran San Francisco Bay Area journalist who has written extensively about Asian America. *Yellow Journalist* is a provocative collection of essays, commentaries, stories and columns he has written for both mainstream news organizations and English-language Asian ethnic publications. The subjects range widely from family to film, parenting to politics, identity to immigration, affirmative action to acculturation, culture to criminality. In one essay, Wong advocates elevating the Angel Island Immigration Station to national status equal to Ellis Island Immigration Museum. In another, he poignantly relates why a National Archives regional center is important to Asian Americans seeking the truth about their Angel Island immigration history. A third tells the story of an Angel Island detainee.

*Yellow Journalist* is available at leading bookstores and on online booksellers. For more information, visit [www.yellowjournalist.com](http://www.yellowjournalist.com), or email William Wong at [wongink@earthlink.net](mailto:wongink@earthlink.net).

# The Truth in Rented Rooms

Poetry by Koon Woon (Kaya 1998)

Review by AIISF Board Member Jeffrey A. Ow

*How my father, his back curving  
more each year*

*From the weight of the morning air,*

*The ever-increasing weight of wife  
and eight children,*

*All permissible dreams and sorrows  
clinging on like grapes,*

*That in the unofficial histories  
of his veins,*

*Bombs dropped near his village,  
metal and body parts flew,*

*The naked bulb here was the same  
naked bulb in Angel Island,*

*Detained there because he was an  
immigrant, a Chinese immigrant*

– FROM “FORTUNE TELLING” (47-49)

Seattle-based poet Koon Woon is a generation removed from the isolation and alienation of those that passed through Angel Island. However, in his first collection of poetry, *The Truth in Rented Rooms*, Woon wrestles with similar issues culled from his own experiences and observations as a Chinese immigrant. Woon, through immigrant eyes, invites us to peek into the lonely settings of our urban surroundings: cheap hotel rooms, dilapidated apartments, greasy spoon dives. In response to the cold reality of immigrant life in the United States, Woon’s poetry conjures up a nostalgic vision of a China to which one knowingly cannot quite return.

While displaced temporally from the period of the Angel Island poets, Woon’s work shares similar truths with those of his predecessors. The poems are haunting and disturbing, but beautifully worded. He eloquently captures the pain and confusion of the Asian American experience:

*And today there’s a gray sky over  
the gas chamber outside my*

*window,*

*And why do I feel the fear of 10  
years ago, when Vincent Chin’s  
head was*

*Bashed in by a Michigan baseball  
bat, as I try to be judicious*

*About jalapeno, garlic, oolong tea,  
and tempura, and how do they  
differ,*

*And how are they the same?*

– FROM “I HAVE AUGMENTED MY PREMISE OF ISOLATION AND SORROW THE WORLD COMES INTO THE PALLOR OF MY ROOM...” (56-57)

Though often introspective, Woon’s writing can at times turn playful. In “How to Cook Rice” he rhapsodizes about the intricacies of the process but then closes by noting “if you still don’t know how to cook rice, buy a Japanese/automatic rice cooker; it makes perfect rice every time.” Woon’s own creation boils the Chinese immigrant experience down to its essence, yet hints at alternative ways of seeing.

For more information on *The Truth in Rented Rooms*, please visit the publisher’s website at <http://www.kaya.com>.

## WISHLIST

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