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The Poetic Monument: The Chinese Detainees at the Angel Island Immigration Station* **

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Abstract

Monuments are built forms of emphasized commemorative meanings. Dictionaries of English generally define monuments as built forms explicitly erected to remind people of important events and individuals by especially privileged dominant groups. For either a political purpose or an aesthetic value, the sociology of monuments states that they are essential for the articulation of the national politics of memory and identity. Often, monuments are erected to nurture people's minds with the favorable historical narratives by obliterating those they feel uncomfortable with. Those aesthetic or political objects represent the dominant culture's values and tools in the hands of those in power. In this case monuments tell the history of their dominant worldview. However the Chinese poetry carved into the walls of the barracks in the Angel Island Immigration Station can be considered as the silent and humble monuments of the discomforting history of the political elites. Object of a darker chapter in American history, the Angel Island Poems are a recently discovered body of over 135 poems, written primarily in Chinese. These were carved into the walls at the Angel Island Immigration Station, where Chinese immigrants were detained between1910-1940. They can be regarded as murals, but I prefer to consider them as a metaphorical monument. This study is an attempt for critical readings of these poems to indicate that human beings always need to say something through any kind of communication tool including monuments. Consequently, monuments do not necessarily represent events or identities that political elites feel comfortable. Some might represent the history of immigration that they find uncomfortable at the time in which they were made as in the case of the Angel Island Immigration Station poems.

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Şiirsel Anıt: Angel Island Göç İstasyonu'nda Göz Altında Tutulan Çinli Göçmenler * **

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Öz

Anıtlar, Türk Dil Kurumu'nca da tarihsel bir özelliği olan büyük ve önemli bir olayı, ulusça sevilen, sayılan, tarihe geçmiş bir kimseyi gelecek kuşaklara tarih boyunca anımsatmak için yapılan ya da dikilen, göze çarpacak büyüklükte, simge niteliğinde yapı, yontu, gömüt, sütun ya da benzeri bir yapıt olarak nitelendirilir. Anıtların sosyolojisi ster siyasi bir amaç ister estetik bir değer olsun, bunların ulusal hafıza ve kimlik politikalarının eklemlenmesi için gerekli olduğunu belirtir. Çoğu zaman anıtlar, insanların rahatsız olduğu geçmiş öğeleri yok ederek, olumlu tarih anlatılarıyla zihinlerini beslemek için dikilir. Bu estetik ya da politik nesneler, iktidardakilerin elindeki egemen kültürün değerlerini ve araçlarını temsil ediyor. Bu durumda anıtlar, egemen dünya görüşlerinin tarihini anlatır. Ancak the Angel Island Immigration Station'daki (Melek Adası Göç İstasyonu) kışlanın duvarlarına oyulmuş Çin şiiri, siyasi elitlerin rahatsız edici tarihinin sessiz ve mütevazı anıtları olarak değerlendirilebilir. Amerikan tarihinde daha karanlık bir bölümün konusu olan the Angel Island şiirleri, yakın zamanda keşfedilen ve çoğunlukla Çince yazılmış 135'ten fazla şiirden oluşan bir koleksiyondur. Bunlar, 1910-1940 yılları arasında Çinli göçmenlerin gözaltına alındığı the Angel Island Immigration Station'ın duvarlarına oyulmuştu. Duvar resmi olarak kabul edilebilirler ama ben onları mecazi ya da şiirsel bir anıt olarak değerlendirmeyi tercih ediyorum. Bu çalışma, insanoğlunun anıtlar da dahil olmak üzere her türlü iletişim aracı aracılığıyla her zaman bir şeyler söyleme ihtiyacı duyduğunu göstermek amacıyla bu şiirlerin eleştirel bir okumasını yapma girişimidir. Sonuç olarak, anıtlar mutlaka siyasi elitlerin rahat hissettiği olayları veya kimlikleri temsil etmiyor. Bazıları, the Angel Island Immigration Station şiirlerinde olduğu gibi, yapıldıkları dönemde rahatsız oldukları göç tarihini temsil edebilir.

INTRODUCTION

Monuments are built forms of emphasized commemorative meanings, usually favorable picture of a community. They reflect the culture and/or ideology of the present and serve as a heritage for the future generations. Alois Riegl explains that "a monument in its oldest and most original sense is a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events [...] alive in the mind of future generations" (1903: 117). Here comes a question in mind: whose history, events or figures do they tell? They are erected explicitly to remind people of important events and individuals by especially privileged dominant groups. For either a political purpose or an aesthetic value, the sociology of monuments states that they are essential for articulation of the national politics of memory and identity. Those aesthetic or political objects represent the dominant culture's values and tools in the hands of those in power in a given country. In this case, monuments tell the history of the dominant worldview. However, the Chinese poems carved into the walls of the barracks in the Angel Island Immigration Station can be considered as the silent and humble monuments of the discomforting history of the political elites. An object of the darker chapter in the American history, the poems are a recently discovered body of over 135 poems, written primarily in Chinese. Here is the list of detention barracks inscriptions:

220 Chinese poems

96 Chinese inscriptions

89 English inscriptions

62 Japanese inscriptions

33 Chinese graphic images

7 Russian inscriptions

4 South Asian inscriptions

4 European inscriptions

2 Korean inscriptions[1]

These poems were carved into the walls at the Angel Island Immigration Station, where mainly Chinese immigrants were detained between 1910 and 1940 as the list above suggests. They can be regarded as murals, but I prefer to consider them as a metaphorical monument. This study is an attempt for critical readings of these poems to indicate that human beings always need to vent their feelings through any kind of communication means including monuments. So, monuments do not necessarily represent events or identities that political elites feel comfortable with.

Political elites have more power and resources to establish monuments and memorials (Dwyer, 2002: 32; Till, 2003: 4). They use monuments to represent their dominant worldviews in space. Consequently, monuments represent selective historical narratives focusing only on events and identities that are comfortable for political elites. However, the Chinese poetry carved into the walls of the barracks on the Angel Island Immigration Station can be considered as the silent and humble monuments of the discomforting history of the political elites.

[1] https://www.aiisf.org/poems-and-inscriptions

The Angel Island Immigration Station is in the San Francisco Bay near Alcatraz. The main place immigrants from Asia were processed to enter the country. Its primary mission was to better enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The first picture below is the Angel Island Immigration Station:

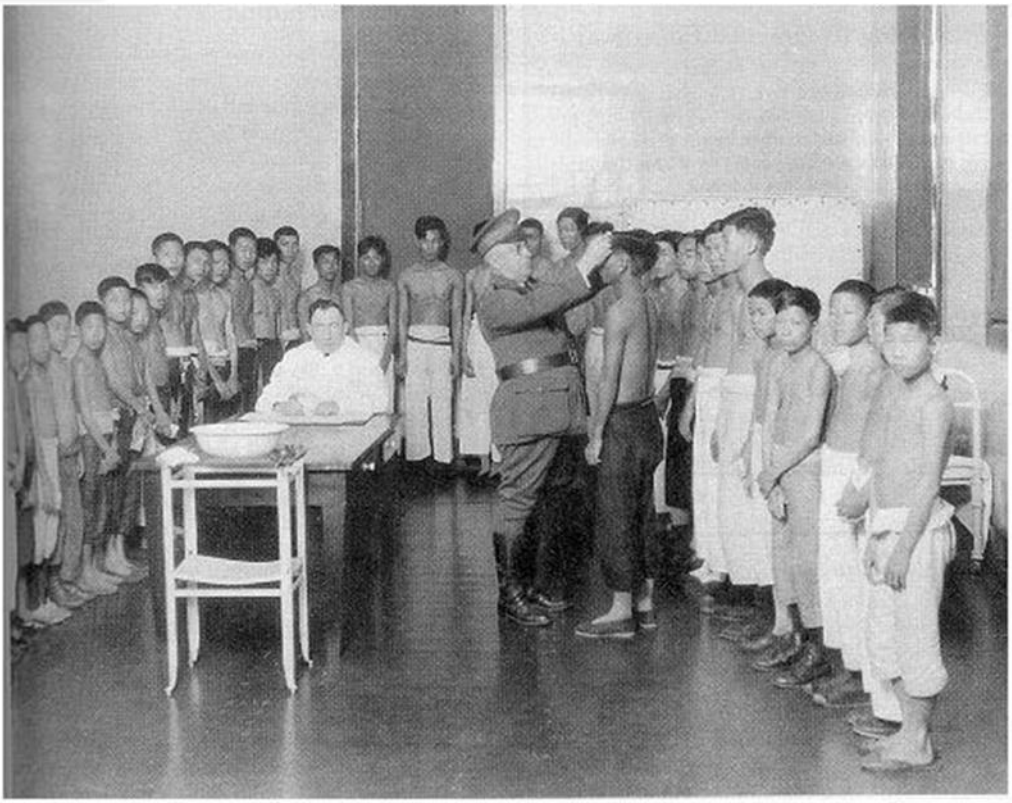
[2]

When ships arrived in San Francisco with Chinese passengers on board, they would be met by immigration officials who interrogated each person individually and send most of them in any doubt to Angel Island for further inspection. Once immigrants would board the pier at the Angel Island Station and be removed of their baggage to be searched. The authorities strictly operated separation procedures where Chinese immigrants were kept apart from other immigrants of different nations, and males separated from females until their situations were clearly decided. Later all of the immigrants would go under medical examinations conducted by the U.S Public Health Service to look for signs of contagious diseases such as hook worm, round worm, and liver fluke, and etc. "In this way, medical staff were responding to and participating in the widely held belief that the Chinese were a greater health risk than other racial groups; a fear also exhibited in sporadic health scares and fumigations of the Chinatown in San Francisco. Following the medical examination Chinese immigrants were moved to the detention barracks where they would await their appeal for entry in a legal hearing in front of an immigration inspector, prison guard, translator, and stenographer. Since the Exclusion

Act was directed against Chinese laborers specifically, a detainee's case rested on providing evidence that they were either natural born American citizens or members of a class exempt from the exclusion law be it merchant, student, teacher, diplomat or traveler. The policy was such that the burden of proof fell on the arrival to provide evidence they were not excludable. Persuading skeptical officials charged with enforcing such laws was difficult. A case might be heard a number of times where answers provided to an inspector would be compared to answers given by external witnesses vouching for the applicant's identity" (Hoskins, 2005: 13).

In the next picture, you will see a room of young male detainees at the Angel Island c.1920s and in the third picture, a room of female ones waiting to be accepted by the government as a legal immigrant:

[2] https://www.aiisf.org/



3



4

[3] https://www.aiisf.org/
[4] https://www.aiisf.org/

Newcomers to the island were subjected to severe interrogation and humiliating physical examinations which often led to detentions—from a few weeks to months, and sometimes even years—while waiting for the decisions of their fates.

Chinese immigrants-culturally inferior! This popularly held belief positioned Chinese at the bottom in a hierarchy of races. There were called "coolies", meaning little better than slaves. 400.000 Asians were detained on the Angel Island during 1910 to 1940. Most of them were Chinese. They were exposed to discrimination, frustration, and humiliating attitudes different from those of other nations.

The widely held belief was that the Chinese were a greater health risk than other racial groups. Few of them chose to write to reflect their sorrow and anger. American mistreatment triggered their poetry. Qian Zhongshu (1910-1988), a Chinese scholar, assumes that poetry can enhance the process for complaint as he observes in the Chinese literary history. He states that "whenever the Chinese were in a fix and needed to vent their feelings, they tended to write poetry" (Zhongshu, 1985: 6).

It is no wonder that there are more than a hundred poems on the wooden walls. These were carved into the walls at the Angel Island Immigration Station, where Chinese immigrants were detained between1910-1940.

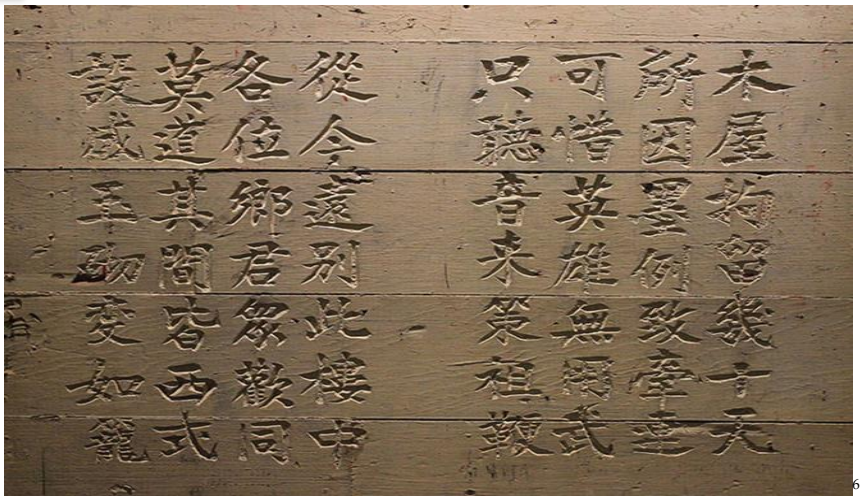
Most of them were written in the classical style of Chinese poetry, four or eight lines per poem. In Chinese literature, there are at least five types of poetry:

1. Chi poetry
2. Shi poetry (composed of couple)
3. Ge poetry (ge means song)
4. Qu poetry
5. Fu poetry

The poems mainly are of the classic Chinese poetry, notably the Tang Poetry. Some of the poems actually observe the strict rhyming patterns but this is not universal to all poems found at the Immigration Station. The prevailing sentiments are disappointment, anger, depression, injustice, hopelessness, pain, brutal treatment and homesickness.

The poems are largely carved by male immigrants who journeyed to America from the Cantonese villages in Guandong province, South China. "Most of the carvings are found filled with spackling type putty and covered by repainting. Ironically this periodic maintenance at the barracks has allowed today's archeological research teams to roughly track the dates the inscriptions were made: writings on top of varnish paint can be dated between 1908 and 1912; on medium green paint, no later than 1916; on pale green paint, no later than 1927; on tan and brown, no later than 1932; on grey, no later than 1942; and on yellow up to 1946. The poems counter the historical record of Chinese exclusion commonly made by the white nativist intelligentsia of the time where Chinese immigrants were typically depicted as servile, racially inferior and essentially alien. They follow the conventions of the classical Tang dynasty style with four or five stanzas made up of between seven and five syllables in each line. Common to jueju poetry which would have been familiar to the detainees at the time, the poems employ sophisticated allegorical references that evoke characters in Chinese myth and legend to represent the frustration, hostility and pain of being imprisoned" (Hoskins, 2005: 4). Here are some of the pictures of the poems at the Station walls:[5]

[5] The poems were published in Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung's book, Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940, 2nd edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).



[6]



[7]



Below, you will find a recent translation of a wall carving found in the detention barracks. The authors of

[6] https://www.aiisf.org/
[7] https://www.aiisf.org/

many poems remain unknown. Translated it reads:

Pity it is that a hero has no way of exercising his power.
He can only wait for the word to whip his horse on a homeward journey.
From this moment on, we say goodbye to this house.
My fellow countrymen here are rejoicing like me.
Say not that here everything is western styled.
Even if it were built with jade, it has turned into a cage.[8]

The next poem is a heartbreaking one. The author sadly reflects his poor and miserable condition. He is imprisoned both by poverty and the authority in the island:

This place is called the island of immortals,
When, in fact, this mountain wilderness is a prison.
Once you see the open net, why throw yourself in?
It is only because of empty pockets I can do nothing else.[9]

The other poem presents us with the themes of alienation, immigration, labor politics and race. It sounds a collective biography of the detainees:

When a newcomer arrives in America
He will surely be seized and put in the wooden building,
Like a major criminal, I have already been here one autumn.
The Americans refused me admission; I have been barred and deported back.
Alongside the ship, the waves are huge.
Returning to the motherland is truly distressing.
We Chinese of a weak nation,
Sigh bitterly at the lack of freedom.
The day our nation becomes strong,
I swear I will cut off the barbarians' heads.[10]

Another poem is quite similar to the previous one, drawing another biographical picture of the Chinese sad experience at the Station:

In the last month of summer, I arrived in America on a ship.
After crossing the ocean, the ship docked and I waited to go on shore.
Because of the records, the innocent was imprisoned in a wooden building.
Reflecting on the event, my heart is vexed and depressed.
I composed a poem to rid myself of sadness and worry.
At present, my application for admission has not yet been dismissed.
As I record the cause of my situation, it really provokes my anger.
Sitting here, uselessly delayed for long years and months, I am like a pigeon in a cage.

The author in the next one outburst his anger for mistreatment by the authorities and thus it serves as a historical account of that period:

[8] Davidson, M. and Meier, L. (2002) Olmstead Cultural Landscape Report for Angel Island Immigration Station.
[9] Island, Poem #23 p.60.
[10] Island, Poem # 44p.161.

America has power, but not justice.
In prison, we were victimized as if we were guilty.
Given no opportunity to explain, it was really brutal.
I bow my head in reflection but there is nothing I can do.

The station processed hundreds of thousands of immigrants seeking entry into the United States. The acceptance procedures were race-based and all Chinese whatever their legal status were met with suspicion even guilty without inspecting by the authorities as reflected in the poem above.

The author in this poem calls the American authorities as barbarians:
I thoroughly hate the barbarians because they do not respect justice.
They continually promulgate harsh laws to show off their prowess.
They oppress the overseas Chinese and also violate treaties.
They examine for hookworms and practice hundreds of despotic acts.

Another personal account of the immigration process ending up with deporting is reported in the following poem:

林到美洲,	Lim, upon arriving in America,
逮入木樓,	Was arrested, put in the wooden building,
成為囚犯。	And made a prisoner.
来此一秋,	I have already been here for one autumn.
美人不准,	The Americans refused me admission.
批撥回頭。	I was ordered to be deported.
消息報告,	When the news was told,
回國驚憂。	I was frightened and troubled about returning to my country.
國弱華人,	We Chinese of a weak nation
歎不自由。	Can only sigh at the lack of freedom.

鐵城道人題
Written by a Taoist from the Town of Iron

[11]

The walls of the detention barracks became the voice of the Chinese men held inside. Through frustration, fear, anxiety, and possibly even boredom, many detainees wrote or carved their thoughts into the soft wooden walls. These inscriptions present a personal account of a unique immigration experience that is now a part of American heritage. The whole Station stands as a historical monument in this sense, still telling the stories of the detainess and their sad experiences.

Originally, I had intended to come to America last year.
Lack of money delayed me until early autumn.
It was on the day that the Weaver Maiden met the Cowherd
That I took passage on the President Lincoln.
I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days.
Fortunately, I arrived safely on the American continent.
I thought I could land in a few days.
How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering in the wooden building?
The barbarians' abuse is really difficult to take.
When my family's circumstances stir my emotions, a double stream of tears flows.

[11] https://www.aiisf.org/

I only wish I can land in San Francisco soon,
Thus sparing me this additional sorrow here.[12]

Here are other angry poems whose authors call the station prison. They are kept there without any legal investigation. He cries their helplessness and hopelessness in this era of scorn:

After leaping into prison, I cannot come out.
From endless sorrows, tears and blood streak.
The jingwei bird carries gravel to fill its old grudge.
The migrating wild goose complains to the moon, mourning his harried life.
When Ziqing was in distant lands, who pitied and inquired after him?
When Ruan Ji reached the end of the road, he shed futile tears.
The scented grass and hidden orchids complain of withering and falling.
When may I be allowed to soar at my own pleasing?[13]

Another angry poem says:

Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day,
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about it?
I look to see who is happy, but they only sit quietly.
I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall asleep.
The days are long and the bottle constantly empty; my sad mood, even so, is not dispelled.
Nights are long and the pillow cold; who can pity my loneliness?
After experiencing such loneliness and sorrow,
Why not just return home and learn to plow the fields?[14]

All Chinese seeking admission through San Fransisco were subjected to detailed scrutiny and delay, and almost all of them were detained on the Station. To fail the immigration hearing meant sure exclusion and return to China or wherever the unsuccessful entrant had come from. In those years, the detainees had no right of appeal to the courts (Daniels, 2023: 8). Knowing this, they found that writing poems on the walls was the only way to let others learn what they were going through:

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

The following sad poem vividly summarizes the whole story of the Chinese immigrants kept at the Station. He is well aware of the racism and criticizes the Americans to be tyrannical towards them. The Chinese do not deserve this racist approach and thus the poet reflects almost all his fellows' regretful feelings coming on this land of not opportunity but nightmare:

[12] Island, Poem # 7.
[13] Island, Poem # 41, Written by Lee Gengbo of Toishan.
[14] Island, Poem # 43

I am distressed that we Chinese are
in this wooden building
It is actually racial barriers which cause
difficulties on Yingtai Island.
Even while they are tyrannical they still
claim to be humanitarian.
I should regret my taking the risks of
coming in the first place.

These poems are other components of American identity as immigration being critical to economy, culture, and identity. It is evidence that the racial exclusion has played a role in building the United States. It is a result of anti-Chinese legislation (1875) and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The lines from the Angel Island Immigration Station provide an example of how Chinese American identity gets constructed before our very eyes. The majority of the poems at the Station employ *shi* forms, a lyric tradition in the classical Chinese Poetry. These poems are short and evocate human feelings. Most probably each poet felt responsibility to express his/her fellow immigrants about their detention and future. The poems reflect a shared experience. "There are strong cultural reasons that moved Chinese immigrants to inscribe poems on the walls. Poetry was the dominant medium of artistic expression in old China. Public poetry held a special social and ritual function, whether inscribed on a building, a tablet placed at an important site, or even carved on the side of a cliff (Egan, 5).

The poetic monument reflects the relationship between memory, history and identity in the landscape, which also constitutes the American heritage. The Angel Island poems in the wooden barracks are the invisible monument built silently by the Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s. Today, the accounts of the immigration experience, their silent cry of grief carved into the walls have become part of the national heritage landscape – deemed significant national treasures and of course a visible one!

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