H. M. Lai

Island

Chinese Immigrants and the Angel Island Immigration Station

Native American Miwoks living in what is now Marin County probably had their own designation for the largest island in San Francisco Bay, but when the Spanish ship *San Carlos* dropped anchor nearby in August, 1769, commanding officer Juan Manuel de Ayala named it *Isla de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles.* Anglicized to "Angel Island" after California fell under American rule in 1846, it was known simply as "Island" to an entire generation of Chinese who immigrated to California in the first half of the twentieth century. For them this scenic spot with the cherubic name held no romantic memories, for between 1910 and 1940 it was the location of the Angel Island Immigration Station. As a major facility of the bureaucratic apparatus established to administer the Chinese exclusion laws, the complex temporarily housed tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants who were interrogated and then processed or rejected for entry into the United States.[1]

In the year 1882, a key date in American immigration history, the first Chinese exclusion law was passed following years of domestic anti-Chinese agitation. Marking a basic change in U.S. immigration policy, the law declared immigration to be no longer free and unrestricted, and the Chinese were given the dubious honor of being the first racial group whose entry to the country was thus limited.[2]

Initially the 1882 law barred only the entry of Chinese laborers for ten years and left open the question of admission of other classes of Chinese. By 1888, however, the pressure of anti-Chinese groups had shaped its interpretation so as to deny admission to all Chinese except those classes specifically exempted by treaty: officials, merchants, teachers, students, and travelers for curiosity or pleasure. The exclusion act was revised

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# of Immortals

several more times, closing loopholes and becoming stricter in its provisions, and by the turn of the century, the restriction process was consciously and actively moving toward total exclusion.[3]

During these years, events across the Pacific did not bode well for the Chinese people either. China's traditional society was falling apart under the pressures generated by intruding Western nations, and life was increasingly difficult. Many Chinese, especially in southeast China, were virtually forced to seek better conditions abroad. Thus, despite the known unfriendly environment for the Chinese in the United States, they were willing to risk rejection under the exclusion laws in order to enter this country and improve their economic lot. Some traveled to Canada or Mexico, where they were smuggled across the borders into the United States. Others sought admission at one of the American ports of entry, the largest proportion debarking at San Francisco. Many held credentials of questionable validity.[4]

Under the United States immigration regulations, the burden of proof for entry qualification rested

> upon Chinese persons claiming the right of admission to, or residence within, the United States, to establish such right affirmatively and satisfactorily . . . and in every doubtful case the benefit of the doubt shall be given . . . to the United States government.

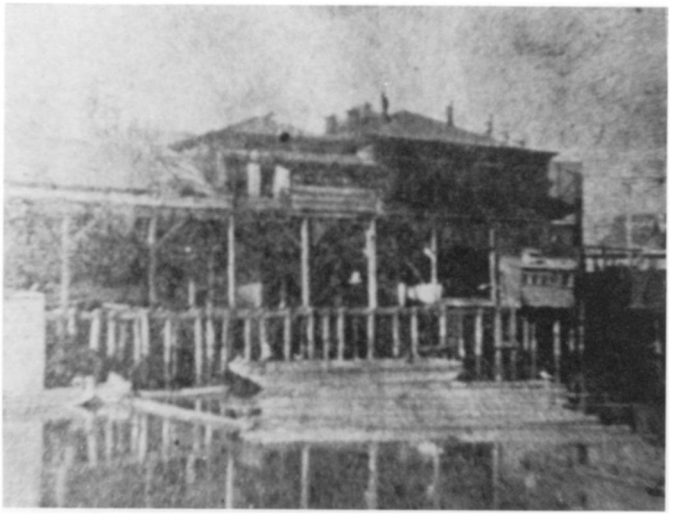
Reflecting the anti-Chinese prejudices of the period, the belief at the Bureau of Immigration was that the Chinese were a people "deficient in a sense of the moral obligation of an oath," and inspectors held all Chinese claims for right of admission suspect until proven otherwise. Believing that Chinese immigration was bad for the country, they sought to exclude rather than to admit and hence routinely subjected new arrivals to intensive and detailed cross examinations.[5]

Over the years an extremely high percentage of Chinese were denied admittance to the United States. For example, during the fiscal year 1902-1903, inspectors in San Francisco landed 1628 Chinese and debarred 516, and for the fiscal years 1903 through 1905 they rejected one out of every four applicants from the exempt classes.[6] To the authorities these statistics served to prove the fraudulent intent of the bulk of the Chinese applying for admission.

> *"In every doubtful case the benefit of the doubt shall be given . . . to the United States government."*

The Chinese, however, viewed the immigration authorities' draconian administration of the exclusion laws as unfair and discriminatory, terming the statutes *keli* or "tyrannical laws." They addressed numerous complaints to the United States government and to Chinese diplomats stationed in this country, objecting to the harsh treatment of the Chinese in general and protesting in particular the suspicious and discourteous attitude evidenced toward members of the exempt classes. They charged that many questions asked by the immigration officials were unreasonable, impossible to answer correctly, and intended to entrap rather than to elucidate information. They alleged that some officials even questioned female applicants on intimate details of their marital lives and embarrassed them into silence.[7]

In 1905 these grievances about immigration procedures resulted in a boycott of American goods which started in Shanghai and spread to Canton and other Chinese cities and many overseas Chinese communities. Sustained several months, the boycott forced the U.S. to relax some of the more objectionable regulations. The basic negative attitude of the immigration authorities toward Chinese immigration, however, remained unchanged,[8] and it was against this background of struggle that the Angel Island Immigration Station was proposed and established.



In the late nineteenth century as many as 500 Chinese were detained in a dismal two-story shed at Pacific Mail's wharf.

hroughout the late 1880's and early 1900's Chinese ship passengers arriving at San Francisco were detained in a two-story shed at the Pacific Mail Steamship Company wharf (known to the Cantonese Chinese immigrants as *muk uk* or "wooden house") until immigration inspectors could examine them and determine their admissibility. As many as 400 or 500 people were crammed into the facility, and conditions there were described in 1900 by Reverend Ira Condit, a missionary working among the Chinese in California, as follows:

> Merchants, laborers, are all alike penned up, like a flock of sheep, in a wharf-shed, for many days, and often weeks, at their own expense, and are denied all communication with their own people while the investigation of their cases moves its slow length along.[9]

Chinese community leaders in Chinatown, alarmed at the unsafe and unsanitary condition of the structure, accordingly addressed numerous complaints to U.S. officials. Immigration Commissioner General F. P. Sargent finally inspected the facility on November 18, 1902, and was forced to declare that

> [so] far as the Chinese immigrants are concerned, the facilities . . . are entirely inadequate. . . . [The] detention shed should be abolished forthwith. Chinese are human beings and are entitled to humane treatment, and this is something they do not receive under present conditions. . . .[10]

Sargent's report of 1903 recommended that funds be appropriated to erect an immigration station on Angel Island for accommodation of aliens, chiefly Chinese and other Asians. The forthcoming decision to move the station to Angel Island was not solely due to humanitarian concern, however, for officials also felt that the island location would effectively prevent Chinese on the outside from communicating with the detainees and would isolate immigrants with "the communicable diseases which . . . are peculiarly prevalent among aliens from oriental countries."[11] The station would also be escape-proof.

The Sundry Civil Appropriation Act of March 3, 1905, included $200,000 for erection of the station, and Walter J. Mathews was selected as architect for the facility. Work begun at the North Garrison (Winslow Cove) area of the island was interrupted by the San Francisco Earthquake in 1906, and an additional appropriation had to be requested in the same year because of the increased cost of labor and materials. Construction resumed in 1907, and the facility was completed in October of 1908. The complex included an administration building, power house, hospital, and detention building, with a wharf and dock storehouse at the beach below.[12]

Inquiring into the expense involved in opening the station, Assistant Secretary of Labor Wheeler reported that it was a modern and commodious plant and "delightfully located, so far as scenic, climatic and health conditions are concerned." He was of the opinion, however, that the station's remoteness from San Francisco would entail additional expense in the order of $50,000 per annum. Wheeler also reported that there was no necessity for its immediate occupancy.[13]

Although leaders in San Francisco's Chinatown opposed the idea of transferring the immigration station to the middle of San Francisco Bay, they neglected to take action until the facility was almost ready to be occupied. On November 8, 1909, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce belatedly sent a letter signed by eighty prominent Chinese merchants to President William Howard Taft and the Department of Commerce and Labor protesting the move. The group maintained that the insular location and infrequency of ferry service would make it difficult for witnesses to attend immigra-

tion examinations, especially for whites who were somewhat reluctant to be witnesses in Chinese cases. The Chinese merchants also petitioned Wu Tingfang, the Chinese minister in Washington, D.C., to apply pressure through diplomatic channels.[14]

There is a Chinese saying, "A weak nation cannot practice effective diplomacy," and as the imperial Chinese government had been powerless to protect her subjects in America from harsh anti-Chinese exclusion laws, so the troubled government was ineffective in forestalling the move to the new facility. Hence, on November 21 the Department of Commerce and Labor rejected the Chinese community's remonstrations, pointing out that they had not raised any voice of protest when the facility was in the design stage and that it was now too late to change plans.[15]

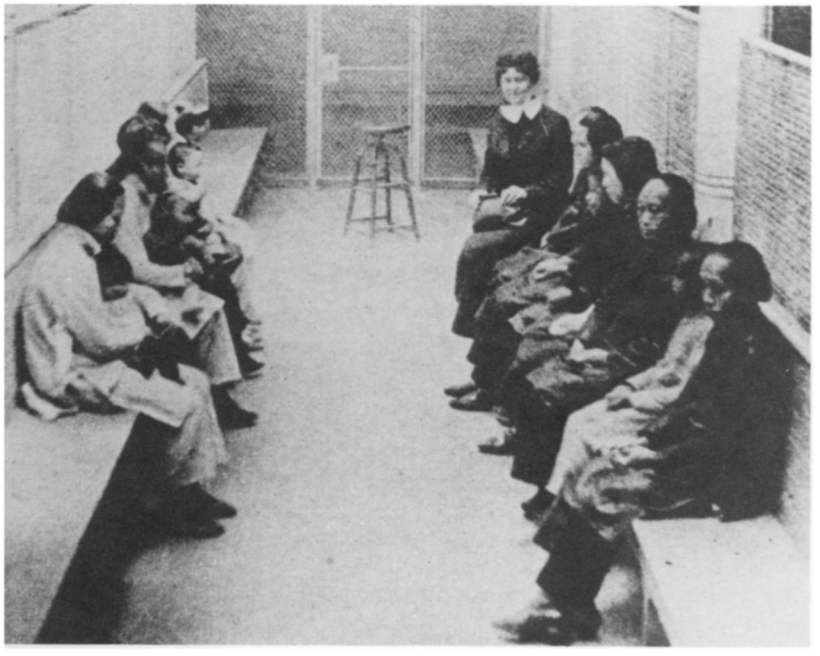
The Angel Island station officially opened on January 21, 1910. The next morning at 9:00 A.M., 101 people from the S.S. *Siberia* (including 84 Chinese men, 1 Chinese woman, 3 Japanese, and 4 East Indians) who had not been allowed to debark in San Francisco were removed from Pacific Mail Company's wharf and transferred to the island. The Chinese immigrants on the S.S. *China* followed, and by the end of the day, over 400 passengers, mostly Chinese, had been moved to the insular facility without incident.[16]

The opening of the facility moved the influential Chinatown newspaper *Chinese World* to reflect on past treatment of the community and to anticipate its future reception. On January 22, 1910, it editorialized:

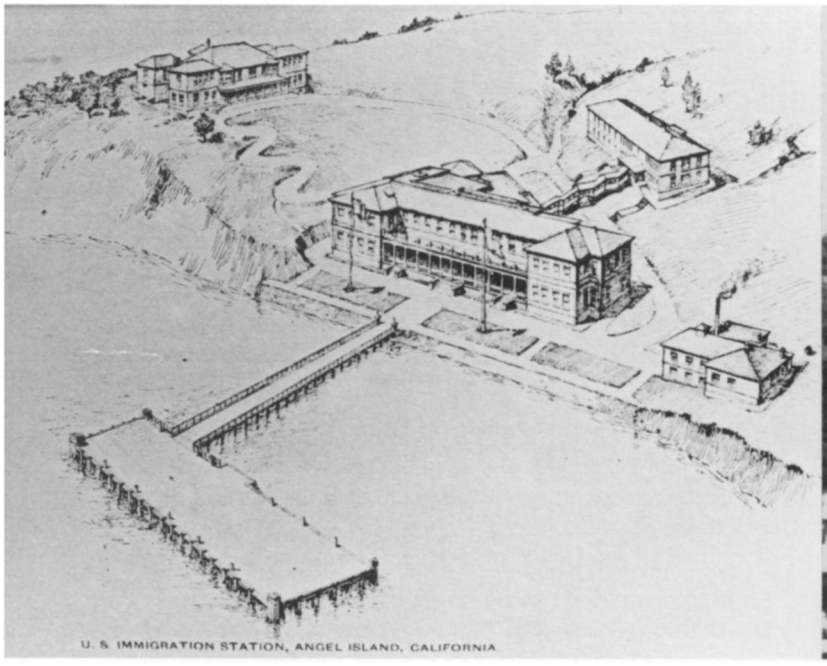
> Ever since the establishment of this wooden shed at the wharf, the mistreatment of us Chinese confined there was worse than for jailed prisoners. The walls were covered with poems [expressing feelings about being incarcerated]; traces of tears soaked the floor. There were even some who could not endure the cruel abuse and took their own lives. The ropes they used to hang themselves are still visible. Those seeing this cannot help but feel aggrieved and gnash their teeth in anger. Now the Chinese had been moved from this wooden shed. From now on we will be confined on a barren offshore island.

The Chinese community in San Francisco still had hopes of returning the station to the mainland, and a few weeks later the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce of San Francisco respectively appointed Ng Poon Chew (Wu Panzhao) and Look Tin Eli (Lu Runging) to a delegation being sent to Washington, D.C., to fight the harsh and discriminatory immigration regulations. However, when the men raised the question of moving the station back to the mainland with the secretary of commerce and labor, he refused to entertain the proposal seriously and declared that access to Angel Island was easier than access to Oakland (across the Bay from San Francisco). If the Chinese didn't consider the Pacific Ocean and a month-long voyage from Hong Kong an obstacle, he concluded, why should they object to the short boat trip to Angel Island.[17]

The government did respond to the delegation's re-



Women and men were held separately during their confinement.



quests with some small concessions. It agreed to allow principals and witnesses in outgoing cases to be examined on the mainland and to land all new exempts and return domiciled exempts whose cases seemed to hold no reason for further inquiry.[18] Most Chinese arrivals and their witnesses, however, still would be required to go to Angel Island. The disappointed delegation returned with meager results.

In April of that year, when Manchu Prince Zai Tao arrived at San Francisco to study military conditions in the U.S., the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) petitioned him to use his offices to help improve the treatment of the Chinese and to move the immigration station back to the mainland. In June, attorney Carroll Cook was sent by the CCBA to Washington, D.C., to discuss immigration concerns with officials, and again the status of the island station was one of the items on his agenda. There was also talk of having the transpacific Chinese passenger traffic bypass San Francisco for Seattle, as well as of renewing the 1905 anti-American boycott if the government did not accede to the Chinese requests. All these efforts to return the immigration station to the mainland failed, however, and it remained on Angel Island for the next thirty years.[19]

During the first decade of the facility's existence, major internal problems troubled its administration. A few months after its opening, the immigration commissioner supervising the station, Hart North, was suspended from his post. One of the charges leveled against him was that he was partial to Japanese and Hindu immigration.[20]

In 1917 a major scandal developed when a graft ring was discovered to be stealing and manipulating Chinese records at the station in connection with illegal entries. Eighteen people were indicted (including eight from the Immigration Service), and seven were found guilty. As well, the San Francisco law firm of Stidger and Kennah, which handled numerous Chinese cases, was banned from practicing at the Bureau of Immigration.[21] Subsequently, no large scandals reached the station, although from time to time the occasional dismissal of interpreters and other employees indicated that petty graft was by no means completely eradicated.

It also did not take long for the government to tacitly agree with the Chinese that the insular location of the station was unsatisfactory, although they came to the conclusion for different reasons. A few months after the facility's opening, acting commissioner Luther Steward submitted reports highly critical of the many physical and sanitary drawbacks in the facility's design. As early as 1913 the visiting secretary of labor observed that Angel Island was located too far from San Francisco to be convenient as an immigration station, suggesting that Fort Mason or Alcatraz Island might be better sites. In 1920 Immigration Commissioner Edward White de-

The proposed Angel Island facility (left) included a wharf leading to an administration building, a detention building to the rear, and a hospital to the left. Other outbuildings were added to the island complex in the 1910's and 1920's (right).

> *"The ramshackle buildings are nothing but firetraps. . . . The sanitary arrangements are awful. If a private individual had such an establishment, he would be arrested by the local health authorities."*

clared that the facility's structures were like tinder, and he proposed removing the station to the mainland to cut expenses. By 1922 both Assistant Secretary of Labor Edward J. Henning and Commissioner General of Immigration W. W. Husband were in agreement with this idea. The latter declared moreover that the island facilities were filthy and unfit for habitation:

> The plant has practically nothing to commend it. It is made of a conglomeration of ramshackle buildings which are nothing but firetraps. They are illy arranged and inconvenient. The sanitary arrangements are awful. If a private individual had such an establishment he would be arrested by the local health authorities. The whole place is . . . not worth spending any money on.[22]

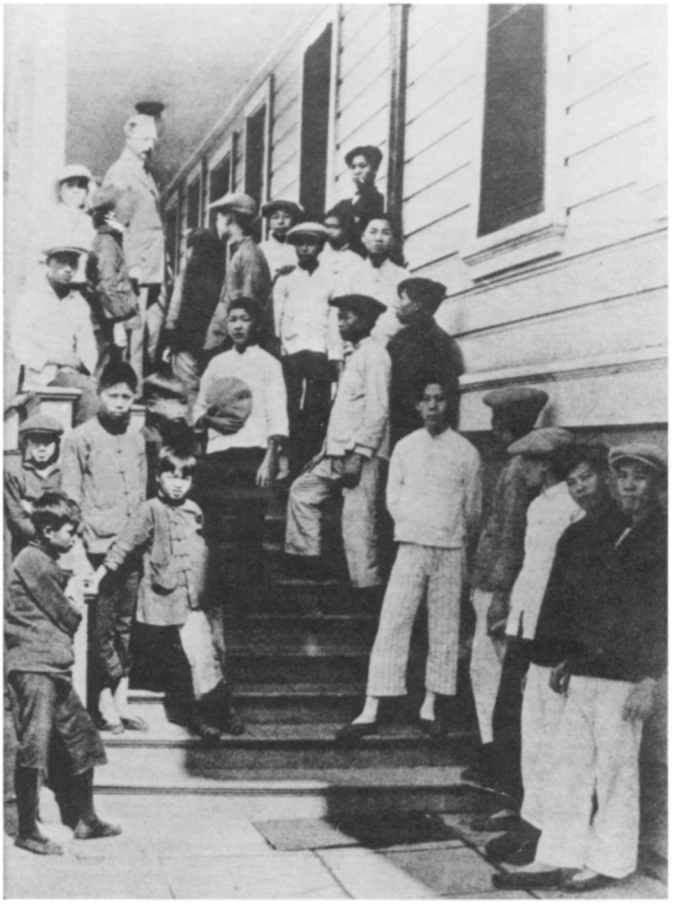
In subsequent years the same questions were raised time and again,[23] but while bureaucrats debated, tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants continued to pass through these facilities over the next two decades. It was not until 1940 that the government finally abandoned the immigration station, and the exodus was hastened by a fire which destroyed the station's administration building on August 12 of that year. On November 5, Angel Island's last group of about 200 aliens, including 125 Chinese men and 19 Chinese women, was transferred to temporary quarters at 801 Silver Avenue in San Francisco.[24]

This final move prompted little opposition, for although discrimination against the Chinese were still common, the issue of Chinese immigration no longer inflamed people's passions in the same way. Exclusion laws had throttled the flow of Chinese to a small stream, and the Chinese in California had dropped from 8.7 percent of the total population in 1880 to less than 0.6 percent in 1940. Most Chinese had been relegated to occupations non-competitive with white Americans and segregated in Chinatown ghettoes. Thus the Chinese were tolerated, if not accepted by many. In the intervening years, too, the focus of racist attacks had shifted to the Japanese. Moreover, by 1940 people's attentions were taken by the more immediate and pressing issue of impending world war.

After the closing of the immigration station, in an attempt to meet the political demands of the "war for democracy," Congress repealed the exclusion acts of 1943 and assigned an annual token immigration quota of 105 to the Chinese. Chinese arrivals, however, were still detained to determine the validity of their applications for admission. As for their detention quarters, after being relocated to Sharp Park in the spring of 1942, they were moved in 1944 into the Appraiser's Building at 630 Sansome Street near San Francisco's waterfront.[25] The practice of detaining Chinese to determine their eligibility for admission was finally discontinued in 1952 when consular officials at the port of embarkation assumed that responsibility.

For thirty years, however, it was the detainees at Angel Island Immigration Station who sampled the full flavor and effect of the exclusion laws.[26] When a ship arrived at San Francisco, immigration officials climbed aboard and inspected the passengers' documents. Those with satisfactory papers could go ashore, and the remainder were transferred to a small steamer and ferried to the island immigration station where they were to await hearings on their applications for entry. In prac-

Immigrants passed endless hours anxiously waiting for their hearings.



tice, most of the detainees were Chinese, although sometimes a few whites and other Asians were also held. Before the 1920's the number included Japanese "picture brides."[27]

When the ferry docked at Angel Island whites were separated from other races, and Chinese were kept apart from Japanese and other Asians. Men and women, including husbands and wives, were separated and not allowed to see or communicate with each other again until they were admitted to the country. Minor children under age twelve or so were assigned to the care of their mothers. Most of the Chinese immigrants, however, were males in their teens or early twenties.

Soon after arrival, the would-be immigrants were taken to the hospital for medical examinations. Because of poor health conditions in rural China, some immigrants were afflicted with parasitic diseases. These cases became major points of contention, because the U.S. government classified certain of these ailments as loathsome and dangerously contagious and sought to use them as grounds for denial of admission. Arrivals with trachoma were excluded in 1903. In 1910 government officials added to the list uncinariasis or hookworm and filiariasis and in 1917 clonorchiasis or liver fluke. Because these regulations affected primarily the Chinese, they seemed to many to be more artificial barriers erected to block their entry. Considerable protests by Chinatown leaders eventually resulted in some cases being allowed to stay for medical treatment.[28]

Chinese who passed the medical hurdle were returned to their dormitories to await hearings on their applications. Men and women lived in separate communal rooms provided with rows of single bunks arranged in two or three tiers. Furnishings were spartan in nature, and privacy was minimal. Men were kept on the second floor of the detention barracks, which was surrounded by a fence to prevent escapes. Women, originally to be detained in the same building, were moved to the second story of the administration building in the 1920's.[29]

At any one time about 200 to 300 males and 30 to 50 females were detained at Angel Island. Most were new arrivals, but some were returning residents whose documents were considered questionable. Also habiting the island were earlier arrivals whose applications had been denied and who were waiting either decisions on their appeal or orders for their departure. Mixed among the detainees were Chinese who had been arrested and sentenced to be deported,[30] as well as transients en route between China and countries neighboring the U.S., especially Mexico and Cuba.[31]

Guards sat outside the dormitories' locked doors, and the Chinese were usually left alone. One Chinese matron, Ah Tai, was available at the women's dormitory to answer to their needs.[32] To forestall the passing of coaching information prior to the detainees' oral examination, no inmate could receive visitors from the outside before his case had been judged. Authorities routinely opened and scrutinized letters and gift packages to and from detainees, inspecting them for possible coaching messages.

When permitted to visit the station, Miss Maurer taught women detainees English.

Sanitary conditions in the dormitories were barely adequate for the thrown-together transient population of strangers from all walks of life. Moreover, janitorial services were limited. Ten months after the station's opening, the acting commissioner was already criticizing the filthy conditions of the facilities. Fourteen years later, circumstances had not improved, for in 1924 the Chinese Benevolent Association bitterly complained to President Calvin Coolidge and Secretary of Labor J. J. Davis about the unhealthy conditions on the island which had allegedly caused several detainees to sicken and die. As late as 1932, the Angel Island Liberty Association, a detainees' organization (see below), was forced to negotiate with the authorities to provide soap and toilet tissue for the detainees.[33]

Deprived of organized activities within the dormitories,[34] many immigrants lolled about or laid on their bunks, most of the time worrying about their future. Some passed the time gambling, but stakes were usually small because the inmates had little pocket money. The literate read Chinese newspapers sent from San Francisco and their own books or those left behind by others. By the late 1920's or early 1930's a phonograph and Chinese opera records were also available for the detainees' amusement. Women sometimes sewed or knitted.

Separate small, fenced, outdoor recreation yards were provided for the men and women so they could breathe fresh air and enjoy sunshine. Once a week they were escorted to the storehouse at the dock where they could select needed items from their baggage. In addition, women and children were sometimes allowed to walk on the grounds in a supervised group, a privilege which was denied to the men.

Somewhat infrequently the detainees received visits from various clergymen of Chinatown's Protestant missions, but, understandably, few were converted to Christianity. During the early 1920's the Chinese YMCA also made regular trips to the island to show movies and teach English.[35] The most regular visitor, however, was Deaconess Katherine Maurer (1881-1962), appointed in 1912 by the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to do Chinese welfare work at the immigration station. Her work was also supported by funds and gifts from the Daughters of the American Revolution. The deaconess, who became known as the "Angel of Angel Island," helped detainees to write letters, taught English, and performed other small services, primarily for the women and children, to make detention somewhat more bearable.[36] Neither she nor other visitors, however, could change the basic conditions created by the discriminatory exclusion laws.

The Chinese held at Angel Island resented their long confinements, particularly because they knew that immigrants from other countries were processed and released within a short time. Their disgruntled feelings were fueled by the enforced idleness and accentuated by unsatisfactory conditions at the station. Unable to change their plight, they frequently petitioned the CCBA, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and the Chinese consul

general for help. The first petition charging mistreatment was sent only a few days after the station opened in 1910.[37]

Sometimes these letters produced serious consequences beyond the expectations of the senders. For example, in 1916 the Chinese consul general in San Francisco, Xu Shanging, responded to detainees' complaints and enlisted the help of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce to investigate conditions at Angel Island. The commissioner general of immigration became irate at the consul general for bypassing diplomatic channels and had him declared *persona non grata* in the United States. Xu was transferred to another post in Panama.[38]

The detainees' major complaint, especially during the early years, was the quality of their food.[39] The concession for providing meals was awarded to private firms based on competitive bids. In 1910, the first contractors, Fong Wing (Kuang Zhujing) and his white partner, appeared to have provided adequate services.[40] However, they lost the contract in 1911 to a white firm which bid 12¢ to their 14¢ per meal, and shortly afterward complaints were heard about poor food. In 1913 a protest by the Chinese consul general forced the island officials to promise changes, but evidently no effective action was undertaken: in 1916 the average cost per meal had dropped to only 8¢.[41]

Within the station, impatient and hot-headed young immigrants often took matters into their own hands and staged disturbances in the dining hall (located in the administration building) to protest the poor food and mistreatment. Such disorders were only rarely reported by the press, but enough of them evidently occurred to cause the immigration officials to post a sign in Chinese warning diners not to make trouble nor to spill food on the floor. In 1919, a large riot broke out, and troops had to be called in to restore order. A year later authorities in Washington, D.C. finally decided to improve the situation, and fuller menus were instituted.[42]

After this move, complaints about the food subsided, although two more dining hall disturbances occurred in 1925, the one on June 30 again requiring troops with fixed bayonets to be called in from Fort MacDowell. On these two occasions, however, the food itself apparently was not the primary cause.[43] The frequency of these outbreaks, whatever their cause, indicates that the resentment harbored among the detainees could easily explode when sparked by a suitable issue.

In later years, the food appeared to be nutritionally adequate although hardly comparable to home-cooked meals. Many immigrants later recalled the meals at the station with distaste, but the unfriendly attitude toward Chinese at the station and anxiety about the future were probably also important factors inducing these negative reactions.

For their mutual aid and to maintain order, male detainees formed in 1922 an organization called the Zizhihui (Self-governing Association), whose Anglicized name, ironically, was Angel Island Liberty Association. The concept appeared to have evolved from the custom in the early years of speaking with a collective voice when asking for help or expressing grievances. Its formation was promoted by politically progressive detainees, and the women did not have a corresponding organization. Officers were usually elected from the people who had been detained the longest, particularly those whose cases were on appeal, and at times respected intellectuals were also selected.[44]

The scope of the association's activities during any particular period depended on the nature of the current detainee population as well as the organizing and leadership abilities of the officers. When new immigrants arrived, the association would often hold a mass meeting to enroll them as members, to explain the rules of conduct at the immigration station, and perhaps to collect

Coaching messages such as this confiscated document outlined pertinent details about home and family upon which Chinese applicants would be cross-examined.

some money for its treasury. With its meager funds the association bought records, books, and recreational equipment for the detainees' amusement. If talented individuals were available and willing, the association would schedule weekly skits, operas, or musical concerts for diversion in the evenings. At times classes were organized for the children,[45] and occasionally officers succeeded in curtailing gambling in the dormitory.

Letters to and from the detainees were often handled by the officers of the group. If immigrants had complaints or requests, the association's spokesman, who usually knew some English, negotiated with the authorities. The association's officers also acted as liaison between the government officials and the inmates.[46]

The association also served as a link in a communication system between the detainees and the San Francisco Chinese community. Most of these activities concerned coaching messages addressed to individual detainees,[47] and communications in the reverse direction were sometimes accomplished.

The communications system depended upon the cooperation of Chinese employees at the station. The largely Chinese kitchen help would visit San Francisco's Chinatown on their days off. There they picked up coaching messages at certain stores, which they smuggled into the station for small fees. Various methods were then used to deliver the messages from the kitchen to the intended recipient. Most often they were passed at mealtimes to the table closest to the kitchen where the association's officers sat. A waiter, for example, would serve an added dish of food and say *ga choi* (Cantonese for "added dish") or some similar phrase. This would be a signal to look for a hidden message which another could later deliver to the addressee. The association's officers also had a mutual understanding that if a guard were to detect the presence of a message, they would prevent its confiscation so that it could not be used as material evidence to jeopardize someone's entry to the country.

In 1928 one such incident made newspaper headlines. A matron escorting the Chinese women into the dining room saw a girl pick up a folded piece of paper which had been dropped by one of the men filing out of the dining room. Suspecting it to be a coaching message, she snatched the paper from the girl, but the men quickly turned, seized the matron, and destroyed the physical evidence.[48]

The Chinese association enjoyed the support of the detainees because it filled a need and fostered a sense of unity among the disparate individuals sharing only one common goal—entering the United States—who were thrown together thousands of miles from their native China. This explains why, despite the one-way traffic (most Chinese went through the station only once) and highly transient population in the dormitory, the association was able to maintain itself for three decades until 1952 or so when Chinese arrivals were no longer detained *en masse* for hearings.

Regardless of the validity of their claims for entry, Chinese arrivals expected to be interrogated intensively.

The immigrant's hearing on his application for admission was the main reason for his detainment at the Angel Island barracks, and sometime after he arrived, he received a summons to appear for this session. During the early years at the center this waiting period could stretch into months, which became the cause of many complaints.[49] By the mid-1920's, however, the delay averaged about two or three weeks. The immigrant's success in hurdling the hearing barrier determined whether the applicant would be admitted to the U.S. or face deportation back to China, and thus it was an important event which could shape the direction of one's entire life.

Regardless of the validity of the Chinese arrival's claim for entry, he expected to be interrogated intensively, and in anticipation, the applicant studied coaching information during the weeks and months preceding his transpacific voyage so as to commit to memory facts pertinent to his family, home life, and native village. The required information was often extremely detailed, and the coaching papers might be a booklet with several dozen pages. This was particularly true in cases where the applicant and his witnesses claimed relationships which were fictitious. Coaching papers were frequently taken aboard ship for review and thrown overboard or destroyed as the ship approached the American harbor.

During the early years, the conduct and procedure for examining applicants and witnesses produced numerous complaints of unfairness from the Chinese, but in 1919 the procedure was changed, and the new boards of special inquiry for Chinese cases put them on the same footing as other aliens. The resulting board of special inquiry was made up of two inspectors, one of whom was the chairman who asked most of the questions, plus a stenographer. This board was not bound by technical rules of procedure or evidence as applied by courts. The purpose of the hearing was to determine if the applicant was entitled to enter the United States under the exclusion acts and general immigration laws.[50]

Many Chinese entered the country as members of the exempt classes, but by far the greater number applied for entry by claiming citizenship by birth or by derivation.[51] Because the majority of Chinese cases involved issues of relationship or American birth and because independent evidence and documents usually did not exist to corroborate or disprove the claims, the scope and method of examination for Chinese cases were different from that applied to other nationalities of immigrants. Evidence was often confined to the testimony offered by the applicant and his witnesses, and the objective of the board was to ascertain the validity of this evidence by cross-examination and comparison of testimony on every matter which might reasonably tend to show whether or not the claim was valid.[52] Under these guidelines the board of inquiry had great latitude in pursuing its interrogation.

Some inspectors were strict but fair; others delighted in matching wits with the interrogee; still others were thorough and meticulous. The type of question asked often depended on the case and the chairman's individual style. Over the years, one of the persistent complaints of the Chinese were questions of minute details which apparently had no relevance to the objectives of the board.[53] Some questions would have been difficult for anyone to answer even under normal circumstances: How many times a year were letters received from a person's father? How did a person's father send the money to travel to the U.S.? How many steps were there at the front door of a person's house? Who lived in the third house in the second row of houses in the

Each Chinese applicant was required to prove his acceptability to immigration officials in grueling interrogation sessions.

village? Of what material was the flooring in the bedroom of a person's house? What was the location of the kitchen rice bin?

Because Chinese immigrants usually did not understand English and the inspectors did not speak fluent Chinese, an interpreter was needed at the hearing proceedings. In order to forestall collusion between the applicant and witnesses, a different interpreter was used for each session. At the end of each session the board chairman would usually ask the interpreter to identify the dialect in which the answers were being made in order to ascertain whether the applicant and witnesses alleged to be members of the same family were speaking the same dialect.

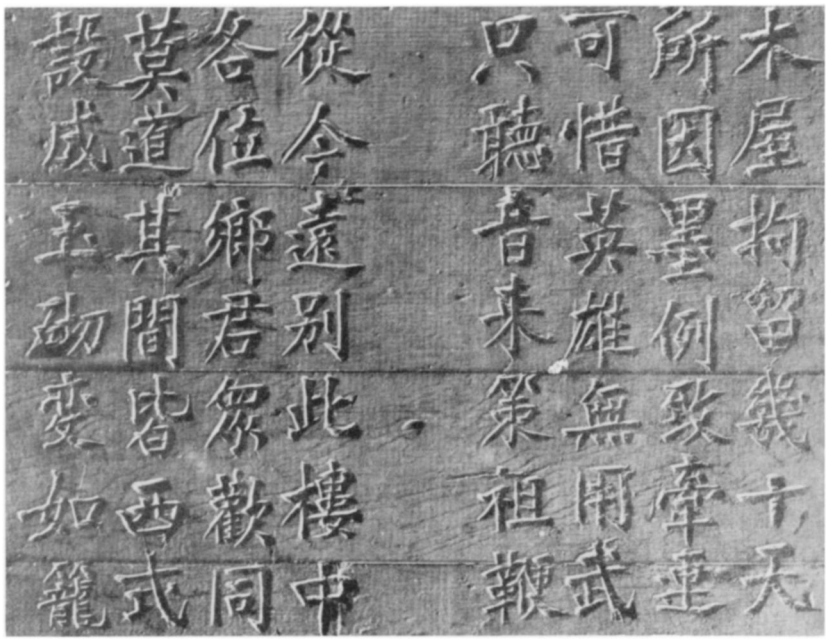
Sometimes applicants and witnesses were recalled and reinterrogated about questionable points. A typical proceeding usually lasted two or three days. During these interrogations, memories might fail, wrong answers might be given, and unforeseen questions might be asked. Hence it was often necessary to smuggle coaching information into the detention quarters to eliminate inconsistencies in answers.

If the testimony of the applicant largely corroborated that of the witnesses, the authorities admitted him into the country. If an unfavorable decision was handed down, the applicant's family had the choice of allowing him to be deported to China or of appealing to higher authorities in Washington, D.C. or to the courts to reverse the judgment.[54] As a result some immigrants languished under detention on Angel Island for as long as two years before their cases were finally decided.

Most of the debarred swallowed their disappointment and stolidly awaited their fate. Some, it was said, committed suicide, although such occurrences appeared to be rare, and little information appeared in the newspapers and public documents.[55] Some disappointed applicants vented their frustrations and mental anguish by writing or carving Chinese poems on the detention center's walls as they waited for the results of appeals or orders for their deportation. Today, many of the carvings which literally covered the quarters' walls are still legible under layers of paint applied in the intervening years.[56]

Usually undated and anonymous, most of this poetry was written before the 1930's. Practically all the poems are in the classical style made famous during China's Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.). Recurrent through many of the works are feelings of disillusion, resentment, and bitterness about the treatment received at Angel Island.

> This place is called an island of immortals
> But as a matter of fact the mountain wilderness is a prison.
> The bird plunges in even though it sees the open net.
> Because of poverty, one can do naught else.



"This place is called
an island of immortals
but . . . the mountain wilderness
is a prison."

Others expressed anger:

The small building with three beams is just sufficient to shelter the body.
It is unbearable to tell accumulated stories on these island slopes.
Wait till the day I become successful and fulfill my wish!
I will not be sparing and will level the customs station.[57]

Still other poems worried about families left behind in China and of the uncertain future:

Why do I have to sit in jail?
It is only because my country is weak and my family is poor.
My parents wait at the door in vain for news.
My wife and child wrap themselves in their quilt, sighing with loneliness.
Even should I be allowed to enter this country,
When can I make enough to return to China with wealth?
Since the ancient days, most of those who leave home become worthless.
Heretofore how many had ever returned from wars?

Few other documents from the Angel Island Immigration Station express more eloquently and intensely the feelings and sentiments of the Chinese immigrants of that era.

Angel Island had been called the Ellis Island of the West. For thousands of immigrants from countries rimming the Pacific Basin, it was the portal to the "land of opportunity." Unlike its famed sister station on the Atlantic coast, however, Angel Island did not extend welcoming hands to all who came, for it was built primarily to facilitate administration of the Chinese exclusion laws. To Chinese arrivals it was a half-open door at best, a prominent symbol of a racist immigration policy.

Angel Island station was established during a period of virulent anti-Chinese prejudices, attitudes reflected in the official stance of the immigration service that Chinese immigrants were undesirable. Immigration authorities attempted to carry out this policy to its fullest measure by draconian execution of the exclusion laws. Sustained resistance by the Chinese community and their sympathizers in the larger society, however, eventually resulted in many harsh regulations and practices being modified or rescinded, and Chinese arrivals gradually were treated with greater regard to due process of law. By the late 1930's the number of Chinese rejections for entry had dropped below 5 percent,[58] although the ordeal of detentions and hearings continued.

Although it is undeniable that many Chinese entered the U.S. with fraudulent credentials and thus technically violated the immigration laws, this practice was made necessary by unjust and discriminatory laws. It is also true that applicants with valid claims were denied entry because they could not properly convince hostile boards of inquiry. Their experiences on Angel Island and under

Anonymous detainees carved poems on the detention center's walls while awaiting decisions on their cases.

the American exclusion laws laid the groundwork for the behavior and attitudes of an entire generation of Chinese Americans. Unpleasant memories as well as shaky legal status led many Chinese to regard immigration officers as objects to avoid and fear. The insensitive attitude of the authorities toward Chinese immigrants only reinforced these sentiments. Moreover, the feeling among Chinese that they were allowed in this country only on sufferance of the dominant white majority helped to foster alienation and non-involvement in the larger society. Racism indeed had exacted a high price.

Today, immigration laws no longer blatantly discriminate against specific racial groups. But the lonely hulk of the Angel Island detention building, with its walls covered with carvings expressing the hopes and heartbreaks of nameless Chinese immigrants, stands as a stark reminder that not so very long ago the nation's immigration policy was based on the premise that some racial groups were preferred to others in the United States.[59]

The photographs on pages 94 and 99 are from the National Archives; on page 95, courtesy Mrs. Everett C. Schneider; and on page 91, the CHS Library. The photograph on page 90 is reproduced from Chinese World, *January 22, 1910; those on page 92, from* Report of the Commissioner of Immigration *for 1907 and 1912. The coaching message is from Senate,* Report 776, *"Chinese Exclusion," 57 Congress, 1 Session, 1904, and the poems is courtesy Mak Takahashi.*

Notes

1. See map by A. L. Kroeber, "Native Tribes, Groups, Language, Families and Dialects of California in 1770," in R. F. Heizer and M. A. Whipple, *The California Indians, A Source Book* (Berkeley, 1971). Angel Island is part of Marin County, which was the home of the Miwoks. M. B. Hoover, H. E. and E. G. Rensch (revised by W. N. Abeloe), *Historic Spots in California*, 3rd Edition (Stanford, 1966), p. 348.

   In their writings Chinese often used the name *Tianshi Dao*, a direct translation of Angel Island. In other instances transliterations of various Cantonese dialects were used, such as *Yin-jou Ai-lan* or *Eng-ji Ai-lun*.
2. T. W. Chinn, H. M. Lai, P. P. Choy, *A History of the Chinese in California* (San Francisco, 1969), p. 26.
3. D. L. McKee: *Chinese Exclusion Versus the Open Door Policy, 1900-1906* (Detroit, 1977), p. 29. The 1882 act was amended in 1884. Two laws were passed in 1888 restricting reentry of laborers. The 1882 act was extended in 1892 and again in 1902. In 1904 exclusion of laborers was extended indefinitely. Exclusion was also extended to U.S. possessions.
4. U.S. Congress, House, *Document No. 847, Compilations from the Records of the Bureau of Immigration of Facts Concerning the Enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Laws* (1906), pp. 13, 9.
5. Ibid., pp. 28, 6.
6. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1902/1903*, p. 107; *1904/1905*, p. 98.
7. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1904/1905*, p. 81; *Chinese World*, May 2, 1910. CCBA Petition to Prince Zai Tao, who was in the U.S. to study military conditions.
8. McKee, *Chinese Exclusion*, 192.
9. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report No. 776, Chinese Exclusion*, 57 Congress, 1 Session, 1904, p. 313; Ira M. Condit, *The Chinaman as We See Him and Fifty Years of Work for Him* (New York, 1900), pp. 86-7.
10. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1909/1910*, p. 132; *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 18, 1902.
11. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1902/1903*, p. 63.
12. Section III, "Historical American Building Survey," in *Recommendations for the Historical Recreational Development of Angel Island*, prepared by Marshall McDonald and Associates for the Division of Beaches and Parks, State of California (1966); U.S. Congress, House, Report No. 4640, *Immigration Station on Angel Island, Cal.*, 59 Congress, 1 Session, 1906; *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 18, 1907.
13. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1908/1909*, p. 144.
14. File No. 52961-26B, Record Set 85, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *Chung Sai Yat Po*, Nov. 12, 1909.
15. *Chung Sai Yat Po*, Nov. 30, 1909.
16. *Chinese World*, Jan. 22, 1910; *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 23, 1910.
17. *Chinese World*, April 5, 1910. The CCBA, also known as the Chinese Six Companies, was at the time considered the spokesman for the Chinese community in America.
18. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1909/1910*, p. 133.
19. *Chinese World*, May 2, June 9, March 1, 1910.
20. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 28, 1910.
21. U.S. Congress, House, *Document No. 209, Report on House Resolution 225.*
22. Luther C. Steward, Acting Commissioner, San Francisco, to commissioner general, Dec. 19, 1910, Record Set 85, National

Archives; *Chinese World*, Nov. 17, 1913; *San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 8, 1920, March 14, 1922, Nov. 1, 1922.

23. For example, see *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 12, 1923; Feb. 27, 1924; Oct. 10, 1927; Nov. 23, 1934; Feb. 24, 1937; Mar. 29, 1937.
24. *Chung Sai Yat Po*, Aug. 12, Nov. 7, 1940.
25. Handwritten manuscript on Angel Island Immigrant Station stationery, n.d., anonymous.
26. Information on the life of Chinese immigrants in the detention quarters was pieced together from interviews with thirty-five people who were on the island, including two interpreters, two inspectors, and a kitchen helper as well as male and female detainees whose experience spanned the entire period the immigration station was active.
27. *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1919/1920*, p. 370. It should be noted that the station was not used solely for immigrants. It was used during World War I to intern enemy alien seamen, and until 1925, it also used to hold federal prisoners. The immigration commissioner ordered all prisoners off the island when some of them attempted to escape.
28. *Chinese World*, December 15, 1910. The Chinese community of San Francisco sent Dr. King H. Kwan (Guan Qiangting) of China as their representative to Washington, D.C. He succeeded in convincing the Department of Commerce and Labor that filiariasis was not a dangerous contagious disease and that patients should be allowed to stay in the U.S. for medical treatment. *Chinese World*, Jan. 30, 1922. The Chinese community fought the liver fluke regulation all through the 1920's. In 1927, Dr. Fred Lam (Lin Ronggui) of Honolulu, delegated by the Chinese Chambers of Commerce of Honolulu and San Francisco to go to Washington, D.C., successfully proved to public health officials that clonorchiasis or liver fluke was not contagious in the U.S., and the regulation was amended accordingly.
29. Dorene Askin, *Historical Report, Angel Island Immigration Station* (draft), June 3, 1977, p. 5.
30. Most of the deportees were arrested for fraudulent entry or for committing crimes. A few were deported for political reasons. Xavier Dea (Xie Cang), a radical leader of the Chinese Unemployed Council in San Francisco, was deported during the early 1930's to the USSR. *Chinese World*, May 16, 1931.
31. H. D. Evey, *Chinese Exclusion Laws and Immigration Laws as Applied to Chinese*, Second series, Lecture No. 32, Pt. 1, Jan. 21, 1935. Some poems in the detention barracks were written by Chinese going to Mexico or Cuba.

    Chinese laborers in transit were admitted if they posted bonds. This was not required if they transferred from one vessel to another vessel in a U.S. port, and some of these evidently were detained on Angel Island. One interviewee who arrived at Angel Island from China in 1929 met his uncle who was on his way to China from Cuba. He was detained on the island awaiting the ship's arrival.

    Many deportees from neighboring countries were also detained on Angel Island while waiting for a ship to China. During the period of anti-Chinese agitation in Mexico in the early 1930's, many Chinese surrendered to U.S. authorities and were deported via San Francisco.
32. Ah Tai was hired from Cameron House, maintained by the Chinese Presbyterian Mission in San Francisco as a home for orphaned girls and girls from broken families and in trouble, in 1910. *Chinese World*, Feb. 22, 1910.
33. Steward to commissioner general, Dec. 19, 1910; *Chinese World*, Mar. 17, 1924, Dec. 3, 1932.
34. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1922/1923*, p. 30.
35. For example, *Chung Sai Yat Po* reported on visits by the Chinese YMCA in the following issues: May 13, June 24, July 21, Aug. 4, Oct. 1, Oct. 15, Oct. 17, Oct. 29, 1925; Aug. 26, 1926. The visits appeared to have ceased by the 1930's.
36. *Kuan Yin, Goddess of Mercy on Angel Island* (Cincinnati, 1939?); Daughters of the American Revolution, *Angel Island* (1929).
37. *Chung Sai Yat Po*, Jan. 27, 1910.
38. *Chinese World*, Feb. 17, Mar. 1, Sept. 26, 1916.
39. The responsibility for feeding the detainees was borne by the steamship company until island officials ruled on eligibility for admission. Subsequent to that date, the cost fell on the shoulders of the applicant or his sponsor. *Chinese World*, Jan. 25, 1911.
40. According to the *Chinese World*, Feb. 28, 1910, the menu was as follows: BREAKFAST—Tea, rice, pork with white greens, winter melon, dried lily flowers, Chinese cabbage, mustard greens, or dried bean sticks, plus one small dish. LUNCH—Congee with pork and dried shrimps, congee with beef and dried white greens, sweet congee with green beans, sweet congee with red beans, coffee and bread, or sweet tapioca soup. DINNER—Tea, rice, beef cooked with cabbage, dried bamboo shoot, potatoes, or turnips. Fresh fish or bean vermicelli with dried shrimp on Friday; plus one small dish. The small dish could be salt fish, preserved olive, fermented bean curd, sweet pickles or plum sauce.
41. *Chinese World*, Feb. 26, 1911; May 13, 1911; Sept. 6, 1913; Mar. 1, 1916.
42. Mary Bamford, *Angel Island, The Ellis Island of the West* (Chicago, 1917), p. 15; *Chinese World*, Jan. 15, 1919; Mar. 19, 1920. The new menu was as follows: BREAKFAST—Tea and rice with following dishes: Pork with preserved stem cabbage, greens (Mon.); pork and mustard greens soup, fermented bean curd (Tues.); pork with greens, salt fish (Wed.); pork with dried bean sticks, plum sauce (Thurs.); pork and winter melon soup, bean curd with soy sauce (Fri.); beef steamed with sweet

pickles, greens (Sat.); bean vermicelli with pork, fermented bean paste (Sun.). LUNCH—Biscuits, bread, and tea with the following: Pork congee (Mon.); sweet tapioca soup (Tues., Thurs., Sat.); pork and fish congee (Wed.); pork congee (Fri.); pork noodles (Sun.). DINNER—Tea, rice with following: Bean vermicelli with pork, salt fish (Mon.); fish with dried lily flowers, preserved olive with potatoes, preserved olives (Wed.); beef with bean sprouts, salt fish (Thurs.); codfish with dried lily flowers, preserved olives (Fri.); pork with white beans, preserved olives (Sat.); beef with turnips or cloud fungus, beef with onions, salt fish (Sun.).

43. In March, 1925, officials decided to let new arrivals dine first because of crowded conditions. Detainees who had been on the island for a longer time took exception to this arrangement and caused a disturbance. *Chinese World*, Mar. 27, 1925. In 1925 Chinese accused a white waiter at the dining hall of being an informer. On June 30 he served the detainees stale bread, and they attacked the waiter and guard with utensils and table settings.
44. *Chinese World*, Aug. 24, 1923. In an interview on July 16, 1977, J. P. Wong, an old Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) member, claimed that Lin Qushen, a Kuomintang member, was the founder of the Zizhihui. So far no other corroborating evidence had been found. The Kuomintang, however, during the early part of the century, was a militant group, and the idea of the Zizhihui was a concept which would fit into the Kuomintang ideology of that period.
45. For example, in 1932 the Chinese association started a school. *Chinese World*, Jan. 9, 1932.
46. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 6, 1940.
47. Gilbert Woo (Hu Jingnan); "Messengers on Angel Island (Tianshi Dao shang ti Daixinren)" *Chinese Pacific Weekly*, Nov. 28, 1974.
48. *San Francisco Examiner*, Mar. 20, 1928.
49. In 1913 the Chinese consul general complained of long delays in Chinese cases. *Chinese World*, Nov. 8, 1913. In 1916 a committee of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce investigating conditions on Angel Island found the same situation. *Chinese World*, Mar. 1, 1916.
50. *U.S. Immigration Service Bulletin*, Vol. I, No. 12, Mar. 1, 1919. Edward L. Haff: *Boards of Special Inquiry*, 2nd Series, Lecture No. 24, Nov. 26, 1934.
51. From July 1, 1920, until June 30, 1940, some 71,040 Chinese entered the U.S. as U.S. citizens, while aliens admitted during the same period numbered 66,039, with a large percentage being merchants and their families. Timothy J. Molloy, "A Century of Chinese Immigration: A Brief Review," *Immigration and Naturalization Service Monthly Review*, Dec., 1947, pp. 69-75. Most of the citizens in the earlier years were "native sons" but by the late 1920's, more and more sons and even grandsons of natives began to apply for admission. *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration 1927/1928*, p. 15.
52. Haff, *Boards of Special Inquiry*.
53. A joint investigating committee of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce and the Merchant's Exchange found it "an impossibility" for any applicant to answer the inspector's questions correctly. *Chinese Defender*, Oct. 10, 1910. Another Chamber investigating committee also concluded that inspectors asked nit-picking questions. *Chinese World*, Mar. 1, 1916. One inspector from the 1930's recalled that he used to probe for information about: the applicant himself; the applicant's family; older generations related to applicant; the applicant's village; neighbors in the applicant's village; the applicant's house in the village; the village market attended by the applicant's family; the homeward journey of the applicant's father; the applicant's trip to Hong Kong.
54. Haff, *Boards of Special Inquiry*.
55. One of the rare incidents noted by the press was an unsuccessful suicide attempt in 1926, when a woman jumped from the building and injured her head and left leg. *Chinese World*, May 18, 1926.

    At least two suicides, one successful and the other unsuccessful, were reported in 1948. By this time, the detention quarters was in the Appraisers' Building in San Francisco. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 24, Oct. 27, 1948.
56. There are more than 60 poems identified so far on the walls of the detention building. In addition two collections of poems copied by detainees Smiley Jann and Tet Yee in 1931 and 1932 respectively had come forth. The Jann and Yee collections included 92 and 93 poems each. In all there are more than 130 different poems known today.
57. The Chinese immigrants often did not distinguish between the custom and immigration stations.
58. *Annual Reports, Secretary of Labor* for 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940 (Washington, D.C.).
59. In 1976, the California state legislature passed a bill allocating $250,000 for the preservation and historical interpretation of the immigration detention building on Angel Island.