

70 *Introduction*

Cantonese vernacular writings from Chinatown provide us with an authentic glimpse into the fascinating and diverse lives of the Chinese affected by the American experience at the turn of this century.

ONE

Immigration Blues

(Chinese text on the left page, English text on the right page)

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 opened an infamous chapter in United States immigration history, one that brought insurmountable hardship to the Chinese. The moment that their ship docked at the San Francisco pier, the Chinese immigrants were herded into the notorious detention center known to all the Chinese as the "Muk uk" (Mu wu), or "Wooden Barracks," to be processed for immigration. Before 1910, detainees were sent to a wooden building alongside the Pacific Mail Steamship Company pier that was known as the "Tongsan Matau" (Tangshan Matou), the China Dock (now Pier 50 on the San Francisco waterfront). Because of rampant corruption and the facility's poor physical condition, it ceased to be used in 1910. Instead, the government put into operation the newly built Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay to process immigrants and returnees from Asia. This station was sometimes called the Ellis Island of the West Coast.

At Angel Island, the Chinese had to submit to a bat-

tery of physical examinations and harsh interrogations. Those who passed were ferried to San Francisco to begin their new life; those who did not were deported back to China permanently. Detainees at the Wooden Barracks were not allowed to go beyond the compound or to meet any outside visitors. It was not uncommon to be detained in the Wooden Barracks for several weeks, even over a year, while awaiting processing. The facilities were minimal, without any consideration for privacy. Suicides were not unknown.

Many of the Chinese at the Angel Island Wooden Barracks wrote poems expressing their agony, frustration, anger, and despair. They would scribble the lines all over the walls of the barracks where they slept. In the 1930s, two detainees copied these scribbles and brought them to San Francisco. However, this genre of Chinese immigration poetry remained unknown to most people until recently.*

In 1940, a fire destroyed the administration building of the Angel Island Immigration Station, and the use of the facility was soon halted. Detainees were moved to another detention center in San Francisco. Barrack 37, the housing compound, survived the fire, but was forgotten for thirty years. Finally in the early 1970s, when the building was targeted for demolition, the Chinese scribbles on the walls caught the attention of the Chinese in San Francisco. Community efforts from Chinatown saved Barrack 37, and it has since become a historical site, augmented by an exhibit on the island's Chinese immigration history. Over 135 Wooden Barracks poems are extant today.

* See n. 73 of introduction for publication information.

The Cantonese folk rhymes on immigration in the 1911 anthology represent the earliest collection of published poems dealing with the Chinese immigration experience. They are different from the poems on the Wooden Barrack walls. Not only do these rhymes protest the harsh treatment at the Wooden Barracks; they also show that Angel Island with its Wooden Barracks was not a euphoric Ellis Island for the Chinese immigrants. Instead, it was a contradiction to the principles of liberty that testified to injustice. This criticism, so pronounced in these rhymes, reveals that the Chinese immigrants did have an appreciation of the American principles of justice and democracy. They expected to be treated on that level and they believed that they should be accorded such rights. This was, I believe, the first crude sign of their Americanization.

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1

As soon as it is announced
the ship has reached America:
I burst out cheering,
I have found precious pearls.
How can I bear the detention upon arrival,
Doctors and immigration officials refusing
to let me go?
All the abuse—
I can't describe it with a pen.
I'm held captive in a wooden barrack, like King Wen
in Youli.*
No end to the misery and sadness in my heart.

2

The moment I hear
We've entered the port,
I am all ready:
my belongings wrapped in a bundle.
~~Who would have expected joy to become sorrow?~~
Detained in a dark, crude, filthy room?
What can I do?
Cruel treatment, not one restful breath of air,
Scarcity of food, severe restrictions—all
unbearable.
Here even a proud man bows his head low.

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(三)準：作「准」；未准紙；
(二)稅員：海關官員
(一)一話：一說
不發准許入境證件

一話^(一)船到美。歡同得寶珠。
那堪抵埠受羈縻，醫生稅員未准紙^(二)。
受太氣。筆尖難以紀。
板樓困入如差里，無限淒涼心裡悲。

JS[G] I.13b

(二)才能較，沒法計較，無可奈何
(一)伏：作「祇」

一聞入港口。打起個伏包^(一)。
誰知歡喜反為愁。閨室受困更淒陋。
有能較^(二)。殘酷氣難捱。
缺食不堪嚴掣肘。英雄到此也垂頭。

JS[G] I.13b

* King Wen (ca. 1200 B.C.), the first ruler of the Zhou dynasty, was detained in Youli for being an adversary of the ruling Shang.

3

In search of a pin-head gain,
I was idle in an impoverished village.
I've risked a perilous journey to come to the Flowery
Flag Nation.

Immigration officers interrogated me:
And, just for a slight lapse of memory,
I am deported, and imprisoned in this barren
mountain.

A brave man cannot use his might here,
And he can't take one step beyond the confines.

(一)花旗：美國
(二)稅員：參看歌#1
(三)撥：驅逐

「欲在蠅頭利。窮鄉沒作置。」
東危應險走花旗。遇着稅員盤詰汝。
稍忘記。撥禁荒島裡。
好漢填無用武地。不能一步越雷池。

JSGJ 1.5a

4

At home I was in poverty,
constantly worried about firewood and rice.
I borrowed money
to come to Gold Mountain.

Immigration officers cross-examined me;
no way could I get through.
Deported to this island,
like a convicted criminal.

Here—
Mournful sighs fill the gloomy room.
A nation weak; her people often humiliated
Like animals, tortured and destroyed at others'
whim.

(一)金山：美國
(二)撥：參看歌#3
(三)埃奇：音譯「島」；
指大使島

「家貧柴米患。資本來金山。」
關員審問脫身難。撥往埃奇如監犯。
到此間。閨室長嗟嘆。
國弱被人多辱慢。儼然畜類任摧殘。」

JSGJ 1.14a

5

Wooden barracks, all specially built;
It's clear they're detention cells.
We Chinese enter this country and suffer
All sorts of autocratic restrictions made at
whim.

What a disappointment—
Cooped up inside an iron cage;
We have an impotent ambassador who cannot
handle matters.
We knit our brows and cry for heaven gives no
recourse for our suffering.

(一)係：是
(二)困埋：困在一起

板樓特別起。明白係監獄。
華人入境受凌其。種種專制由在彼。
一有爭氣。困埋鐵籠裡。
雖有使臣難料理。呼天無路皺埋眉。

JSJ L.13b

6

The wooden cell is like a steel barrel.
Firmly shut, not even a breeze can filter
through.

Over a hundred cruel laws, hard to list
them all;
Ten thousand grievances, all from the
tortures day and night.
Worry, and more worry—
How can I sleep in peace or eat at ease?
There isn't a cangue, but the hidden
punishment is just as weighty.*
Tears soak my clothes; frustration fills my
bosom.

(一)唔窮：不盡

室板如鐵桶。嚴關不滿風。
百般苛例講唔窮。朝夕被凌非萬種。
憂忡忡。寢膳邊安用。
雖無枷鎖陰刑重。淚滿衣裳悶滿胸。

JSJ L.14a

* A cangue consists of two locked wooden boards with holes for the neck and hands. A convict wears it around his neck, with his hands bound in front of him and his feet in chains.

7

Dentention is called "awaiting review."
 No letter or message can get through to me.
 My mind's bogged down with a hundred frustrations
 and anxieties,
 My mouth balks at meager meals of rice gruel.
 O, what can I do?
 Just when can I go ashore?
 Imprisoned in a coop, unable to breathe,
 My countrymen are made into a herd of cattle!

8

America, I have come and landed,
 And am stranded here, for more than a year.
 Suffering thousands upon thousands of
 mistreatments.
 Is it in retribution for a past life that I
 deserve such defilement?
 It is outrageous—
 Being humiliated repeatedly by them.
 I pray my country will become strong and
 even the score:
 Send out troops, like Japan's war against
 Russia!*

萬留名聲候。信息不通透。
 百般抑鬱在心頭。水做一些難入口。
 也能較。幾時得上埠。
 閹室監禁氣莫喘。嗟我同胞作馬牛。
 (一)也能較；無奈何；參看歌#2
 (二)上埠；登岸進城
 (三)氣莫喘；不能平靜休息

JSGJ L14a

來美經抵步。被困年有多。
 個中萬折又千磨。前世吾修折太墮(=)
 但願國強仇報復。興兵恰似日戰俄。
 (一)吾；作「唔」；前世唔修；
 前生沒有好德行，今
 生受苦
 (二)折墮；折磨委屈

JSGJ L14a

*In the Russo-Japanese War of 1903, Japan defeated Russia in Manchuria, in northeastern China, and emerged from this war as a world power.

- 9 A weak nation can't speak up for herself.
Chinese sojourners have come to a foreign
country.
Detained, put on trial, imprisoned in a hillside
building;
If deposition doesn't exactly match: the case is dead
and in a bind.
No chance for release.
My fellow countrymen cry out injustice:
The sole purpose is strict exclusion, to deport
us all back to Hong Kong.
Pity my fellow villagers and their flood of tears.

國弱真難講。華僑到異邦。
阻留候審困山房。供一不符案死綁。
總唔放。同胞呼冤枉。
志在嚴禁撥返港。可憐梓里淚汪汪。

(一) 山房：天使島移民拘留所背山面海，
故曰「山房」
(二) 供：口供
(三) 接：參看歌#3

JSGJ L14a

- 10 The mighty power rescinds her treaty;
The weak race suffers oppression from the mighty.
I am jailed unjustly across the bay,
Enduring the unendurable tyranny of immigration
officials.
Doors: firmly shut.
Guards and officers: watching me closely, like wolves.
News and letters: not permitted.
O, it's hard to bear the hundred cruel regulations
they devise at will.

「強權廢約例。弱種受他掣。」
無幸因我隔江涯。關吏橫行真覺抵。
門緊閉。狼差嚴密略。
音信不容驛使遞。苛條百出確難捱。

(一) 響抵：難以抵受
(二) 睇：監守
(三) 苛條：指排華苛例

JSGJ L13b

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11

American laws, more ferocious than tigers:
Many are the people jailed inside wooden walls,
Detained, interrogated, tortured,
Like birds plunged into an open trap—
What suffering!
To whom can I complain of the tragedy?
I shout to Heaven, but there is no way out!
Had I only known such difficulty in passing
the Golden Gate....
Fed up with this treatment, I regret my journey here.

AFTER THE U.S.
IMMIGRATION OFFICE
I FEEL LIKE A BIRD
PLUNGED INTO AN OPEN TRAP
WHAT SUFFERING!
TO WHOM CAN I COMPLAIN
OF THE TRAGEDY?
I SHOUT TO HEAVEN
BUT THERE IS NO WAY OUT!
HAD I ONLY KNOWN
SUCH DIFFICULTY IN PASSING
THE GOLDEN GATE
I WOULD REGRET MY JOURNEY HERE

(一)折墮：參看歌#8

美例苛於虎。人困板壁多。
所留候審受掣磨。鳥入樊籠折太墮。
慘莫訴。呼天嘆無路。
聞過金門難若此。飽嘗況味悔奔波。

JSGL 1.13b

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12

So, liberty is your national principle;
Why do you practice autocracy?
You don't uphold justice, you Americans,
You detain me in prison, guard me closely.
Your officials are wolves and tigers,
All ruthless, all wanting to bite me.
An innocent man implicated, such an injustice!
When can I get out of this prison and free
my mind?

SO, LIBERTY IS YOUR NATIONAL PRINCIPLE;
WHY DO YOU PRACTICE AUTOCRACY?
YOU DON'T UPHOLD JUSTICE, YOU AMERICANS,
YOU DETAIN ME IN PRISON, GUARD ME CLOSELY.
YOUR OFFICIALS ARE WOLVES AND TIGERS,
ALL RUTHLESS, ALL WANTING TO BITE ME.
AN INNOCENT MAN IMPLICATED, SUCH AN INJUSTICE!
WHEN CAN I GET OUT OF THIS PRISON AND FREE
MY MIND?

(一)略：參看歌#10
(二)惡抵：難以抵受；參看歌#10

自由為國例。何事學專制。
不持公理美人兮。因我監牢嚴密睇。
狼虎差。橫行更欲噬。
罪及無辜真惡抵。幾時出獄開心懷。

JSGL 1.13b

13 Fellow countrymen, four hundred million

strong;

Many are great, with exceptional talents.

We want to come to the Flowery Flag Nation
but are barred;The Golden Gate firmly locked, without even
a crack to crawl through.

This moment—

Truly deplorable is the imprisonment.

Our hearts ache in pain and shame;

Though talented, how can we put on wings and
fly past the barbarians?

14

I roam America undocumented.
White men blackmail me with many demands.

I say one thing, and they, another;

I want to complain of injustice, but my tongue
stutters.

At a loss for words—

I wrack my brain for a solution, to no avail.

Thrown into a prison cage, I cannot fly away.

Don't you think this is cruel? Don't you think
this is cruel?

(一)花旗：參看歌#3

同胞四萬萬。豪傑在其間。
花旗欲入被他攔。緊鎖金門無路越。
這一番。拘囚真可恨。
縱有奇才心痛報。怎能插翼越殘壁。

JSGL 1.5b

(二)佢：他
(三)話：說，認為，覺得

有冊：沒有證件

(一)冊：指「冊紙」；身份證明文件；

遊美因有冊。洋人多索勒。
我講南時佢講北。欲訴冤情又語塞。
口嘿嘿。思量無計策。
被囚牢籠飛不得。汝話苛刻唔苛刻。

JSGL 1.13b

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15 I am a man of heroic deeds;
I am a man with pride and dignity.
My bosom encompasses the height of Heaven
and the brilliance of Earth;
Everywhere they know me as a truly noble
man.
In search of wealth—
Greed led me on the road to Gold Mountain.
Denied landing upon reaching the shore, I am
filled with rage.
With no means to pass the border, what can a
person do?

處世豪傑士。堂堂大丈夫。
高明天地胸全羅。四處傳名真君子。
欲愛富。貪走金山路。
抵岸難登氣滿肚。越界無策奈誰何。

JSGJ 1.5b

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16 Stay at home and lose opportunities;
A hundred considerations lead me to sojourn
in Mexico.
Political parties are like wolves and tigers eliminating
each other;
Hatred and prejudice against foreigners take away our
property and many lives.
Unable to stay on—
I sneak across the border to the American side,
But bump into an immigration officer who sternly
throws the book at me
And orders my expulsion back to China.

守家多失策。百端方旅墨。
政黨相持狼虎萃。仇視外人財命索。
唔樓得^(一)偷闖邊美域。
撞着稅員嚴拉冊。令我回華申逐客。
(一)稅員：參看歌#1
(二)拉冊：審查「冊紙」及拘捕無
冊紙者；參看歌#14

JSGJ 11.11a

17 A transient living beneath a stranger's
fence.

Cruelties increase day by day.

Though innocent, I am arrested and thrown
in jail;Pathetic the lonely bachelors stranded in a
foreign land.

O, let's all go home.

Spare ourselves of this mighty tyrant.

The outside world may be entertaining at times;

But life at home is just as bustling.

T W O

*Lamentations of
Stranded Sojourners*

寄居人羣下。苛刻日加。
無辜被拘禁監衙。鵠留異地構孤寡。
歸去罷。免受他強霸。

外國世界雖樂也。故園風景却繁華。

JSGJ II.40b

Economic hardship is the theme of the rhymes contained in this section. In recruiting Cantonese to work as laborers in *America's West*, Western capitalists preached the promise and glory of economic advancement. The possibility of attaining a better life was an irresistible temptation in southeastern China during the mid-nineteenth century, as many of the inhabitants of the region had been reduced to a marginal existence by natural and human disasters. Therefore, the news of economic opportunity was a welcome relief, and the discovery of gold in California only further encouraged the desperate Cantonese natives to rush to the United States. The promise of a steady income by working on the construction of the transcontinental railroads was also readily accepted by these impoverished men. Thus, they made the journey, thousands of miles across the perilous Pacific Ocean, pursuing their Gold Mountain Dream of success, a dream not too different from that of their European immigrant counterparts.