

unable to save even enough money to return home, they simply showed no more concern for their parents, wives, and children.⁷¹

CANTONESE RHYMES FROM
SAN FRANCISCO CHINATOWN

The experience of the Cantonese immigrants in the United States at the turn of the century has been vividly preserved in vernacular writings and folk songs. Numerous Cantonese popular writings had appeared in newspapers in Chinatown. Most of them were humorous pieces, poking fun at prostitutes, opium addicts, gamblers, and so forth. There were always folk songs and other vernacular writings published in the supplement to the *Chung Sai Yat Po*. The widespread popular acceptance of the genres among the Chinese American communities was probably due to the fact that creative expression in the Cantonese vernacular was widely accepted among the Cantonese men of letters living in Chinatown. They might write formal poetry (i.e., classical poetry) on serious or "refined" occasions, but they would also write vernacular pieces for entertainment on other less serious occasions.

Besides being published in Chinatown, some works found their way to publication in China, as a result of the close relationship between the "home" community and the Chinatown abroad. Many Cantonese vernacular pieces appeared in Canton during the 1905 national movement to boycott American goods in protest of the United States' unfair extension of Chinese exclusion laws. For example, there is a *muk yu* narrative entitled "Lamentation of a Gold Mountain Man at Night"

71. "Jinshan fu xing," p. 68.

("Jinshan ke tan wu geng"),⁷² written anonymously in the first person about immigrant life in America. In addition to expressing economic concerns, the work keenly relates feelings of banishment and indignation over the agony and injustice of the American sojourn; none of these concerns is to be found in any other Cantonese folk song from China. The participant's perspective is also found in another piece of prose, entitled "Preface to Detention in the Wooden Barracks" ("Muwu juliu xu").⁷³ It was first published in the *Sai Gai Yat Po* (which deleted a few lines that were critical of the Manchu government). A year later, the complete version appeared in the *Xinning zazhi*,⁷⁴ a Toisaan publication that also enjoyed wide circulation in America. The prose work deals with the harsh and unequal treatment that the Chinese received in the American immigration station. This complete version also reveals a politically explicit and critical voice.

More significant in the development of early Chinatown literature was the publication in San Francisco of two anthologies of Chinatown folk rhymes. The first, entitled *Jinshan ge ji* (Songs of Gold Mountain) and consisting of 808 pieces, was published in 1911 by Tai Quong Company, a noted Chinatown bookseller and publisher. It cost one dollar. There was no exact count as to how many copies were printed and sold; however,

72. This piece is collected in A Ying, ed., *Fan Mei Hua gong yinyue wenxue ji* (A collection of literature opposing the American exclusion of Chinese laborers) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), pp. 677-78.

73. "Muwu juliu xu," *Sai Gai Yat Po* (January 16, 1910). For an English translation of this prose work, see *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*, comp. and trans. by Him Mark Lai et al. (San Francisco: Hoc Doi, 1980), pp. 138-41.

74. "Muwu juliu xu," *Xinning zazhi* 28 (1911): 76-78.

it quickly sold out. Popular demand led to publication in 1915 of an additional 832 rhymes under the title *Jinshan ge erji* (Songs of Gold Mountain, volume 2). These two volumes contain a total of 1,640 vernacular rhymes in the Cantonese folk song format known as *seisapluk ji go* (*sishiliu zi ge*, or "forty-six-syllable song"). They represent the largest collection of Cantonese folk rhyme writings ever published anywhere.

In their formal structure, these folk rhymes have forty-six syllables, which are arranged in an eight-line pattern of 5-5-7-7-3-5-7-7, with each line ending in a rhyming syllable, as illustrated in the following:⁷⁵

Content	Rhyme scheme							
守 家 多 失 策	sau	ka	tə:	sət	tə'a:k			[a:k]
百 謀 方 旅 墨	pa:k	mau	fə:ŋ	leu	mək			[ək]
政 黨 相 持 狼 虎 革	təeŋ	tə:ŋ	sə:ŋ	tə'i:	lə:ŋ	fu	ka:k	[a:k]
仇 視 外 人 財 命 索	sau	si	ŋə:i	yən	tə'ə:i	mə:ŋ	sə:k	[ə:k]
唔 棲 得	m	tə'a:i	tək					[ək]
偷 關 過 美 域	t'au	kwa:n	kwə:	mei	wək			[ək]
撞 着 稅 員 嚴 拉 冊	tə:ŋ	təək	sui	yun	yi:m	lai	tə'a:k	[a:k]
令 我 回 華 申 逐 客	leŋ	ŋə:	wu:i	wa	sən	tə:k	hə:k	[a:k]

75. *Jinshan ge erji* (San Francisco: Tai Quong Company, 1915), pp. 11a. This piece is translated as song 16 in this anthology. Hereafter, *Jinshan ge ji* (1911) and *Jinshan ge erji* (1915) will be abbreviated as JSGJ I and JSGJ II respectively.

Their structural arrangement appears to be rigid in comparison with the looser format of most other Cantonese folk songs. Most Cantonese folk songs have no specific convention as to the length or number of syllables, other than a rhyming scheme based on Cantonese phonology. On the surface, these forty-six-syllable songs share the rigid line pattern found in the genre of classical Chinese poetry known as the *ci*, which has flourished since the late Tang dynasty (ninth century): both the *ci* and the *seisapluk ji go* must have a specific number of syllables per line, and both have rhymed lines that are irregular in length but evenly matched. However, the similarity ends there. The *ci*-poems and certain other classical Chinese poems also have an extremely regulated pattern of tonal metering for each syllable, commonly known as "tonal balance" (*pingze*),⁷⁶ but this is not a requirement of the forty-six-syllable song. Traditional Chinese poetics also require a rhyme scheme to stringently follow the conventions of the "rhyme books" (*yunshu*), in which the final of each syllable belongs to a given phonological or rhyming category and only syllables sharing the same classification can be used to form an acceptable rhyme scheme. The forty-six-syllable song does not adhere to this formal rhyming convention. As we saw in the example above, the rhyming scheme is rather loose; finals [a:k], [ək], [ə:k], and [ək] are all regarded as rhyming since they are phonetically similar in Cantonese.

It has been claimed that these Chinatown folk rhymes

76. For a detailed study of Chinese poetics, particularly of the formal structure of the different poetic forms in classical Chinese poetry, see Wang Li, *Hanyu shilü xue* (A study of Chinese poetics) (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1962). See chapter 3, pp. 508–683, for a study on *ci* poetics.

have a unique format, different from, though somewhat similar to, that of regular Cantonese folk songs.⁷⁷ However, folk songs with an identical format are also found in Toisaan county.⁷⁸ Liang Shouping, author of the brief preface to the 1911 anthology, plainly states that forty-six-syllable songs are Cantonese vernacular rhymes based on the phonology of spoken Cantonese that need not follow the standard Chinese rhyming and metering system. He adds that the major requirement is that their language consist of local expressions and be colloquial enough for women and children to understand and learn from the song.⁷⁹ Therefore, it is clear that the forty-six-syllable song format is a genuinely Cantonese folk song pattern that differs only because it deals with the American experience and is the product of San Francisco Chinatown. The Chinatown writers merely utilized this Cantonese pattern for their own creation.

In addition to the above-mentioned format, some rhymes follow a "word game" format. Here, a theme word, usually a noun or a verb, which is sometimes used with another word to form a compound, is required on every line. The repetition of the particular word both defines the song's theme and illustrates the writer's skill at arriving at a variety of expressions using the same thematic word. For example, "dream" (*meng*) or "hometown/village" (*xiang*) are frequently used in songs dealing with nostalgic emotions; "wealth" (*cai*) or

77. Li Boji, *History II*, p. 407.

78. Cf. Chen Yuanzhu's 1929 collection of folk songs. Songs 124 and 201 are of the forty-six-syllable song format. Song 201 has been translated in this introduction; see n. 64 above.

79. Liang Shouping, "Preface," in JSGJ I (San Francisco: Tai Quong Company, 1911), pp. 1a-1b.

"money" (*qian*), dealing with the wish to become rich; "flower" (*hua*), dealing with women. The repetition of the theme word in such a short piece makes these rhymes either extremely emotionally laden or comically lighthearted. It was both a challenge and a game for the writers to be innovative under such rules.

Although these folk rhymes were called "playful inkings by celebrities" of San Francisco Chinatown,⁸⁰ sometimes they dealt with matters beyond San Francisco Chinatown in scope. Apparently, many were contributed by writers who lived or had lived as far away as Mexico or Canada. Individual authors, however, were not identified, in keeping with the traditional Chinese practice of maintaining anonymity in the publication of vernacular or vulgar literature, which was frowned on by Confucian teaching. Nevertheless, "teachers," that is, men of letters in the Chinatown community, were given credit as judges and reviewers of these rhymes. For the 1911 anthology, there were fifteen teachers, and for the 1915 one, fourteen. All well-known in Chinatown, they included leaders of the seven largest district associations, editors of newspapers, Chinese-language school teachers, and scholars.⁸¹ This was a project that transcended Seiyup-Saamyup or any other district barriers, as men of letters from all regional backgrounds participated.

It is possible that these folk rhymes were the result of some collective writing activity in San Francisco Chinatown. A topic would be announced and a "teacher" put

80. This statement appears on the cover of the 1915 anthology, and the preface states that the writings come from San Francisco Chinatown.

81. Liu Boji, *History II*, pp. 407-8.

in charge of that topic. Writers would submit their compositions, which were in turn judged and selected by the teacher for publication. Some of the teachers did so for more than three topics. Within each category, some pieces share extremely similar content and language usage. However, the possibility that these rhymes could have been written by the same author seems remote. Rather than repeating his own expressions, it seems more likely that a writer would choose to display his broader creative talents within the same given topic. Similar pieces were written by different writers, perhaps as a result of their response to each other's inspiration and views on the same topic. The preface to the 1915 anthology states that it was the product of over thirty writing activities with over one hundred contributors.⁸² Given that the Chinese population in San Francisco was less than fourteen thousand in the early 1910s, this indicates an enormous response from the community.

As mentioned earlier, the language used in the rhymes is colloquial Cantonese. It is folksy, somewhat vulgar, and at times erotic. Some of the pieces contain faultily written characters, either unintentional mistakes by writers or typographical errors. The errors reveal the unsophisticated peasant background of some of the writers, who became very uninhibited behind the mask of anonymity. The rhymes also contain many impromptu Chinese translations and transliterations of terms commonly used in the United States at the time. For example, terms such as "bicycle" [tɛi: / yau / tɔ̃'e:], "emancipated woman" [tɛi: / yau / nœü], "telephone" [ha:m / si:n], "yellow eagle" (a United States gold coin)

82. "Preface," JSGJ II, p. 1a.

[wɔ:ŋ / yɛŋ], "Alpine" (a county in northeastern California, the Mother Lode) [a: / pa:n], to name only a few, can be found in the two anthologies. Evidently coined by the Cantonese in America, these expressions were different from those used in China. Since some of the terms are no longer in vogue in today's Chinatown vocabulary, these folk rhymes provide an excellent glimpse of how early Chinese Americans improvised new expressions to accommodate and describe their American experience, thus developing their own unique language sensibility.

Numerous standard Chinese clichés and formulaic expressions can also be seen in these works. Many poetic images, allusions, and stock phrases are conventional, revealing little innovation from established usage. For example, "full moon" always alludes to a reunion, "clouds and rain" to sexual intimacy, "geese" to couriers of news, and so on. Hence, these writings may appear unoriginal and trite at first glance. Nevertheless, these "flaws" are evidence that the origin of the rhymes was from oral folk song, in which formulaic expressions and language usage are distinct features.

Most compilers of vernacular writings in old China emphasized that the function of the genre is to be didactic and to provide entertainment for the less educated. For centuries, even the folk songs in the Confucian classic *Shi jing*, China's first book of poetry, were studied for their didactic messages. The compilers of the two Chinatown folk rhyme anthologies shared the same traditional view of vernacular literature. In fact, the writer of the preface to the 1915 volume, under the guise of a pen name, even borrowed the views of Feng Menglong (?–1646), a famous compiler and writer of

vernacular Chinese short stories of the late Ming period, to claim that vernacular writings serve the didactic function better than standard classics and historical writings do—the latter being uninspiring, while the former are more lively and entertaining. He even went a step further in regard to folk songs:

When we study the *Record of History* or *History of the Han Dynasty*, we all get sleepy. But if we read the *West Chamber* or *Water Margin*, each of us would be full of interest and energy. The brisk and refreshing nature of a folk song is even more exquisite than the *West Chamber* or *Water Margin*. In it, every sound has rhythm. If sung in our local dialect, every word rhymes. If put into a tune, it is acceptable to both the refined and the vulgar. It is playful but not at all crude. It has both seriousness and humor. Its ideas are like a clear breeze, and its feelings, moving.⁸³

As far as the content is concerned, there are thirty-four topic categories in the 1911 anthology, and thirty-three in the 1915 one. Many of the categories overlap in theme, as we can see from the chart on page 61.

Of the 1,640 original entries in the two anthologies, I have selected 220 pieces for this translation anthology. I have chosen them because I believe they best illustrate the life of the early Chinese Americans and Chinatown. From the original thirty-plus overlapping categories in each volume, I have grouped the pieces by theme into eleven categories.

Major themes deal with the immigrants' feelings of hardship and loneliness in America, their separation

83. Ibid., pp. 1a–1b.

Topics	Category/Chapter Number		Total
	1911 Anthology	1915 Anthology	
On immigration and related problems	3,* 10		1½
On hardship and poverty in America	4, 12	5, 6, 7, 8, 24, 32	8
On a wife's sorrow due to separation	14, 16, 31, 32, 33	19, 28	7
On homesickness and China	7, 9, 30, 34	21, 22, 23, 29, 30	9
On money and wealth	19, 27	2, 33	4
On Westernization and social conformity	6, 18	1, 9, 12, 16	6
On love and romance	17, 20, 21, 25, 29	18	6
On marriage and weddings	11, 15, 22, 23, 24, 26, 28	3, 20	9
On opium, gambling, and vices other than womanizing	1, 2, 5	4, 25, 26, 31	7
On womanizing	3,* 8	11, 14, 17	4½
On prostitutes	13	10, 13, 15, 27	5
Total	34	33	67

*Category no. 3 in the 1911 anthology is entitled *Meiren*, which can mean either "beautiful women" or "Americans." Its content covers trouble with both women and Americans.

from families, and their experiences in the new land. The rhymes frequently express complaints of hardship and voice disappointment over the American sojourn. The economic motive for the Cantonese emigration to the United States was also pursuit of the American dream in the "land of opportunity." However, these Chinese immigrants soon realized that because of exclu-

sionary practices in America and the white man's belief in manifest destiny, their status was that of unwelcome heathens and they were regarded as an inferior race. Instead of the opportunity to better themselves financially, their life often turned out to be a constant struggle for survival within a marginal existence. These folk rhymes poignantly reveal their disappointment at their failure to attain success and to fulfill their aspirations. Their disillusionment is explicit in the complaint that, even after laboring for scores of years in America, a country that prohibited their naturalization and denied them equal status, they were unable to get away and go home. The failure to realize their Gold Mountain Dream was both a wound to their egos and a betrayal of their mission in America.

The desire to return to China after attaining some kind of financial success is repeatedly expressed in many of these songs. This desire was often attacked during the exclusion days by anti-Chinese critics, who claimed that the Chinese could not assimilate into the greater American society since they were not here for permanent residency. However, critics failed to recognize a more objective explanation for the "sojourner's mentality" that was so pronounced among early Chinese immigrants. From the first, only males were recruited, and the immigration of their families was not encouraged. Second, most of these workers held transient jobs that were located outside a stable or urban environment, jobs such as mining or railroad construction that were not conducive to raising a family. Later, when under the exclusionary laws, Chinese immigrants were neither allowed to be naturalized nor permitted to own land. In California, interracial marriage for the Chinese was ille-

gal. Thus, political and social policies did not provide favorable conditions for the Chinese to establish families and to stay permanently in America. Thus it was only natural that Chinese men would wish to return to China if they could. Hence, the sojourner's mentality was also a product of anti-Chinese practices.

Being a family man, away from home and unable to bring along his family, created tremendous hardships on the immigrant's mental well-being. The folk rhymes express the torment of separation from family extremely vividly, with the voice of frustration never understated. However, the pieces on separation contain an interesting phenomenon, which may seem peculiar to modern readers unfamiliar with traditional Asian culture: few of the rhymes deal specifically with a man's affection for his wife. Instead, most of them contain no direct male expression of conjugal sentiment, unless in the context of expressing affection for the man's parents, siblings, or children. But there are numerous rhymes written from the perspective of a wife, revealing her feelings and affection for the sojourning husband in America. Similar to the Toisaan folk songs in China, these rhymes express sympathy for the plight of the forsaken wives. In particular, they condemn the unbearable absence of physical affection, which they regard as a miserable, pitiful waste of the prime years of a woman's life.

Given the internal evidence in these rhymes, which contain impromptu transliterations of English terms, it is unlikely that they were written by women living in Toisaan. And given the social morality and sex ratio of the Chinatown population during the early 1900s, it is inconceivable that so many Chinese women would have been permitted to mingle actively in male-oriented lit-

erary circles. Nor is it likely that they would have written so frankly and intimately, as if they were back in China writing for their men to come home. No other aspect of their own life in America is mentioned. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that these rhymes were in fact the creation of men living in America, men who took on female personae in their poetic expression of conjugal affection. In many of the poetic works of old China, men write in a feminine voice, particularly on the subject of conjugal affection or marital intimacy. Since the Cantonese men in America were also inhibited from directly expressing conjugal affection for their spouses, they likely also preferred to project themselves as wives expressing such feelings, as if the expression of conjugal affection were not masculine but the privilege of women.

By using the guise of a feminine persona, these men obviously emphasized the common belief that conjugal affection was an exclusively feminine emotion. They wrote what they believed their wives should feel during the separation, inevitably putting the husband at the center of the wife's existence. On the other hand, they also showed a keen understanding of the plight of their women. Their rhymes are comparable to the folk songs sung among Toisaan women. Therefore, to a certain extent, the Cantonese men in America were able to place themselves in their spouses' position and vehemently acknowledge what the American journey had done to their marital relationships. The agony of separation was a shared sorrow for both husband and wife.

Another substantial number of folk rhymes deal with the subjects of women, prostitutes, and sex, reflecting the strong desire for female companionship among the men

in predominantly male Chinatown. We have seen earlier how the lopsided sex ratio created many social problems, such as prostitution. The population imbalance grew even more acute and permanent as laws were enacted to prohibit the entry of Asian women to America. Therefore, behind some of the rather farcical expressions of sexual fantasy in these folk writings, there existed an extremely troubling social phenomenon.

The attitude toward women that these rhymes express is somewhat paradoxical. Empathy is shown for the lonely wives. For the unfortunate women trapped in prostitution, there are remonstrations to leave the shameful profession. The women's suffrage movement in the United States and the emancipation of women are praised as bringing the status of women into the modern era of equality. However, there are numerous rhymes that treat women as objects for the fulfillment for men's sexual fantasy and gratification. For instance, in the rhymes on marriage and weddings, the primary depiction is physical, that is, sexual pleasure. In other rhymes, an old man's fornication with younger women serves to illustrate his vitality and youthfulness at heart. Furthermore, any Chinese woman who was Westernized, that is, whose behavior deviated from traditional Chinese practices, is denounced as licentious, cheap, and immoral.

Such contrasting attitudes about women are not particularly contradictory if we consider the conditions under which the Cantonese man lived in America. His depictions of women were based purely on his own needs. Some immigrants were apparently impressed by the Western democratic idea of equality for women, while others were still bound by the Confucian way of

thinking, in which woman played a subjugated role. Thus, while some rhymes show approval of the modern idea of equality for women in general, others complain of Chinese women's becoming modernized. In addition, since these men lived in a community whose population was predominantly male, out of sheer physical need, they made women the objects of much interest, desire, and fantasy. Thus, while some men were sympathetic toward the plight of prostitutes and critical of prostitution, many nevertheless showed immense indulgence toward and a willing patronage of prostitutes.

Fantasy and desire extended beyond the depiction of women, however. Led by hardship to a desperate desire for wealth, they saw wealth as the absolute gauge of their success in America. It was in the tradition of the work ethic to believe also that frugality and endurance would eventually be rewarded with wealth and success. However, many of these immigrants knew that in reality their only hope of quickly becoming wealthy, or of having enough to finance a triumphant journey home, would be from a sudden opportunity to strike it rich in the States. Thus, they dreamed of unexpected gain: hitting a gold claim or finding some hidden treasure. Although gambling was considered a major vice, in their fantasy of wealth these men came to believe that gambling might provide a source of hope for them: through a game of chance, they could at least try their luck at materializing the Gold Mountain Dream. Rhymes on this theme reflect the desperation and fantastic thinking of the betrayed Chinese immigrants as they wishfully tried to seek solace in gambling.

There are also rhymes about the American-born children of those lucky enough to have families in the

United States. Before the rediscovery of these writings, there were few extant pieces of creative writing that dealt with American-born children of the early days. While the Chinese community was generally perceived as a "bachelor society," that is, predominantly male and transient, these rhymes reveal that Chinese American family units were already well established, mostly among the merchant class. With an increase from five hundred school-age Chinese children in the 1860s to about four thousand in the early 1900s, most of them in San Francisco, a new generation of Chinatown residents was born, whose behavior and lifestyle were often not at all similar to those of their immigrant parents.

It is significant that these few folk rhymes on the younger generation acknowledge the "non-Chinese" behavior of the new Chinatown generation, who were physically Chinese but Westernized in thought. This is an important recognition of their new cultural characteristics. However, the immigrant writers of these rhymes interpret the difference negatively. We have seen that in some rhymes the immigrants praise American culture as modern, liberal, and symbolizing progress and independence. However, the "Americanness" exhibited in American-born children was a disgrace to the immigrants' time-honored Confucian tradition, especially when American-born women refused to play a submissive role. They were regarded as wild and undisciplined, badly influenced by the "barbaric" Western culture. Some American-born women were even labeled women of ill repute and treated despicably, as if they had prostituted themselves. Unfortunately, this negative attitude toward the American-born generation is still evident among the immigrant generation today, the latter

often calling American-borns *mou nou yuk sing* ("brainless bamboo sections"), implying that they are ignorant and shallow, without any sign of intelligence.

Many rhymes reveal that the early immigrants did not live in sheltered alienation from the greater American society, but were influenced by the Western way of life and kept abreast of the important events of the American community. There are rhymes, for example, that comment on the women's suffrage movement. Some praise it as salvation for the many oppressed women; others, marked with chauvinistic contempt, offer sarcastic comments about emancipated women who turn around to bully their husbands, thereby throwing domestic order into chaos and destroying family peace of mind. These expressions, while of course playful, still show the state of mind of the Chinatown residents in that period. Most of the rhymes are didactic and rigidly prescribe to Confucian moral values. Gambling, opium addiction, womanizing, and the other vices of a bachelor society are sternly criticized, although gambling and womanizing are sometimes depicted as enjoyable and a needed indulgence for desperate men.

The viewpoint of a few of the rhymes, however, indicates a departure from the Confucian praise for the selfless individual who would conform and sacrifice himself for his family or for society. They express the view that one's own needs must take precedence over everything else. For instance, in the Confucian framework, having a son has always been regarded as an ethical obligation. A son also provides for the parents' security and comfort in the order of Confucian filial piety. But this belief is ridiculed in some of the rhymes, which state that wealth, a personal gain, is preferable to

a son. This attitude perhaps was a rationalization, de-emphasizing the importance of family piety in the "familyless" existence of the Chinatown residents. This readjustment, coupled with a lopsided criticism of American-born children, indicates that a number of the immigrants were more concerned with their own immediate well-being, and were hence turning their backs on Chinese family ethics and Confucian piety. Ironically, though, these very forces were the reason for their perilous expedition to America in the first place.

In conclusion, the vernacular writings from Chinatown vividly reflect the dynamic life of the early Chinese immigrants, most of whom came from a peasant or merchant background. The works are folksy, artistic illustrations of the early immigrants' experience in the United States; they are the aesthetic echoes and records of the immigrants' own sentiments. As a result, they offer an unusual perspective on early Chinatown life. As writers and readers of these works, the Cantonese immigrants might have also gained from them a sense of belonging and identification, seeing that their own personal experiences in America were actually shared by their fellow countrymen. The immigrant writers, without hesitation or shame, vividly bared their feelings about the American experience, using the artistic form with which they were most comfortable and familiar—the formulaic folk song. These compositions also reveal their authors to be from a region where, in comparison with China's northern urban centers, literary cultivation was not very sophisticated. For us today, it is exciting to learn that these folk rhymes express both the serious and the humorous side of the life of the early immigrants. Together with the Toisaan folk songs on America, these

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

*CROSSING THE GULF OF THE
ANGEL ISLAND, CALIFORNIA, A LITTLE
TIME IN THE PASTORAL.*

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 "Tongsaan 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-