Chinese applicants made up 70 percent of the detained population at any time at Angel Island. They were subjected to tougher examinations, harsher interviews, and longer detentions than any other group. They endured it in the hope that they and their families might build new and better lives in the United States.

In 1940, a fire in the administration building shut down the immigration station after 30 years. It brought to a close one of the bitterest chapters in the history of immigration to America. After World War II (1939–1945), the remaining buildings on the site were abandoned and then marked for demolition. That order was never carried out, thanks to a California State Park ranger named Alexander Weiss, who noticed something interesting in 1970.

While Weiss was making his rounds on the island, his flashlight picked up Chinese calligraphy inscribed on the abandoned barracks building's walls. He informed his superiors of his discovery, but they shared neither his enthusiasm nor his belief that the writing on the walls held any significance. He then contacted a former professor at San Francisco State College, George Araki. Araki and San Francisco photographer Mak Takahashi traveled out to the island. Using floodlights, they photographed practically every inch of the barracks that bore writing before the building was scheduled to be destroyed.

They discovered that most of the calligraphy was poetry. Chinese men who had been detained in the building had carved poems into the walls. They captured their feelings about their ordeal and described the voyage to
The west wind ruffles my thin gauze clothing.  
On the hill sits a tall building with a room of wooden planks.  
I wish I could travel on a cloud far away, reunite with my wife and son.  
When the moonlight shines on me alone, the night seems even longer.  
At the head of the bed there is wine, and my heart is constantly drunk.  
There is no flower beneath my pillow, and my dreams are not sweet.  
To whom can I confide my innermost feelings?  
I rely solely on close friends to relieve my loneliness.

America, the longing for families back home, and the outrage and humiliation at the treatment they received.  
The discovery occurred at a time of intense Asian American activism around issues of racial equality and social justice. It sparked community interest in the site. People lobbied not only for the demolition to be stopped but also for the site to be preserved. In 1976, the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee, which later became the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (www.aiisf.org), helped raise $250,000 for the preservation of the building and the poetry. The barracks opened to the public in 1983.

Since then, community activists and descendants of detainees have worked to recover the immigration history of Angel Island. In 1997, the immigration station earned designation as a National Historic Landmark. Government sources contributed $30 million to preserve the poetry and restore the site as an immigration museum and symbol of America's history of racial exclusion.  

More than 200 Chinese poems have been recovered and recorded. Most of the poems were unsigned, most likely for fear of punishment from the authorities. Many were written and carved by teenaged villagers. Those young men had no more than a grammar school education, but they knew how to express themselves in the classical forms of Chinese poetry. Using simple, direct language, the poems convey a strength of spirit. They also describe what it was like to be imprisoned on the island and chronicle the indignity and trauma that the U.S. immigration system imposed on one group of immigrants.
Immigration officials considered the poems to be graffiti and ordered the walls to be puttied over and painted numerous times, but the carvings still showed through. Different layers of putty and paint are revealed on this wall.

I clasped hands in parting with my brothers and classmates. Because of the mouth, I hastened to cross the American ocean. How was I to know that the Western barbarians had lost their hearts and reason? With a hundred kinds of oppressive laws, they mistreat us Chinese.

It is still not enough after being interrogated and investigated several times; We also have to have our chests examined while naked. Our countrymen suffer this treatment All because our country's power cannot yet expand. If there comes a day when China will be united, I will surely cut out the heart and bowels of the Western barbarian.

Because of the mouth is a phrase meaning to feed oneself or to make a living.

DID YOU KNOW?

The federal government uses a National Historic Landmark designation to recognize a site's national significance and protect its value as part of the nation's heritage. Only about 2,500 places, from all over the United States, have qualified for this program.

Want to learn more?

The author of this article, Judy Yung, has co-edited a book with Him Mark Lai and Genny Lim on the subject of the poems. Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940 introduces readers to 135 poems that were found written or carved onto the walls at Angel Island.