Welcome to America:
The Angel Island Immigration Station

by Jeffrey Ow, Katherine Toy, and Shizue Seigel

On December 9, 1997, the Angel Island Immigration Station joined the Manzanar War Relocation Center as a National Historical Landmark memorializing the Asian American experience. Both sites honor the histories of the many Asian Americans who have been unjustly detained by the US government for little more than their Asian ancestry. While the Angel Island Immigration Station often is viewed primarily as a Chinese American site of sorrow, the greater history of the Immigration Station reflects a pan-Asian American experience.

The Angel Island Experience

Incorrectly thought of as the "the Ellis Island of the West Coast," Angel Island did not welcome Asian immigrants with the romantic notions of Emma Lazarus' famous couplet, "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Many soon realized that exclusionary acts and discriminatory laws would have a major impact on their lives in America. Between 1910 and 1940, as many as 175,000

**Immigration Department statistics are incomplete. Based on available numbers, it appears that immigrants from China and Japanese passed through in roughly equal numbers from 1910 to 1924, each averaging 4,700 per year. The 1924 Immigration Act prohibited immigration of "aliens ineligible for citizenship." However, loopholes existed. According to US law, children born on foreign soil to US citizens were also citizens. Therefore, foreign-born children of* Nisei, Kibei *and US-born Chinese were allowed entry. It is not clear exactly how many were able to take advantage of this provision because statistics by national origin were not kept at Angel Island after 1924.*

Opposite page: Asian immigrants arriving in San Francisco were processed through the Angel Island Immigration Station. All entrants were subjected to medical exams . Many were rejected for minor, easily treated ailments like trachoma or hookworm.

Left: Immigrants were required to present proof of eligibility to immigration officers. Although the majority of Japanese were processed in 2-3 days, the Chinese were held for an average of 2-3 weeks. Considered guilty until proven innocent, Chinese immigrants and their US resident witnesses were subjected to intensive interrogations lasting for days, c. 1910s-20s. National Archives photos, courtesy of NJAHS Archives.

Chinese and 60,000* Japanese immigrants crossed the Pacific only to be greeted by crowded facilities, humiliating medical examinations, intense interrogations, and countless days of waiting at the Angel Island Immigration Station.

The United States passed restrictive immigration laws affecting both Asian and European immigrants through the first half of the 20th Century, often tailored to affect each immigrant group differently. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first of such laws. Chinese laborers were falsely scapegoated as the root of economic turmoil in the United States. Under the Chinese Exclusion Act, the United States barred laborers, while exempting students, merchants, government officials, tourists and the children of American citizens. Thus, immigrating or returning Chinese had their paperwork and testimonies rigorously scrutinized by immigration officials, who hoped to prove that the immigrants were not of the exempt classes.

Angel Island Immigration Station: 1910-1940

While pubic documents state that Angel Island would primarily accommodate Europeans immigrating via the Panama Canal, internal reports indicate that it was constructed in response to the abysmal holding facilities at the Pacific Mail Dock on Pier 40 in San Francisco. There, as many as 500 Chinese immigrants were squeezed into a two-story shed while their cases wound through a lengthy bureaucratic process. After repeated complaints by Chinese community leaders, the Immigration Department decided to build a new immigration station. The isolated Angel Island location was chosen to bar communication with US residents, to quarantine communicable diseases, and to prevent escape.

The Angel Island Immigration Station, which included a pier, barracks, hospital, utility structures, and a large administration building, opened on Jan. 21, 1910. As ships arrived in port, immigration officials separated the immigrants on board. European immigrants with first class tickets and satisfactory paperwork would be allowed to disembark in San Francisco. All immigrants travelling in steerage, including many Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Asian Indians, Portuguese, Mexicans and Russians, were ferried to Angel Island for processing.

The immigrants' first sight of the station's tranquil hillside setting, with

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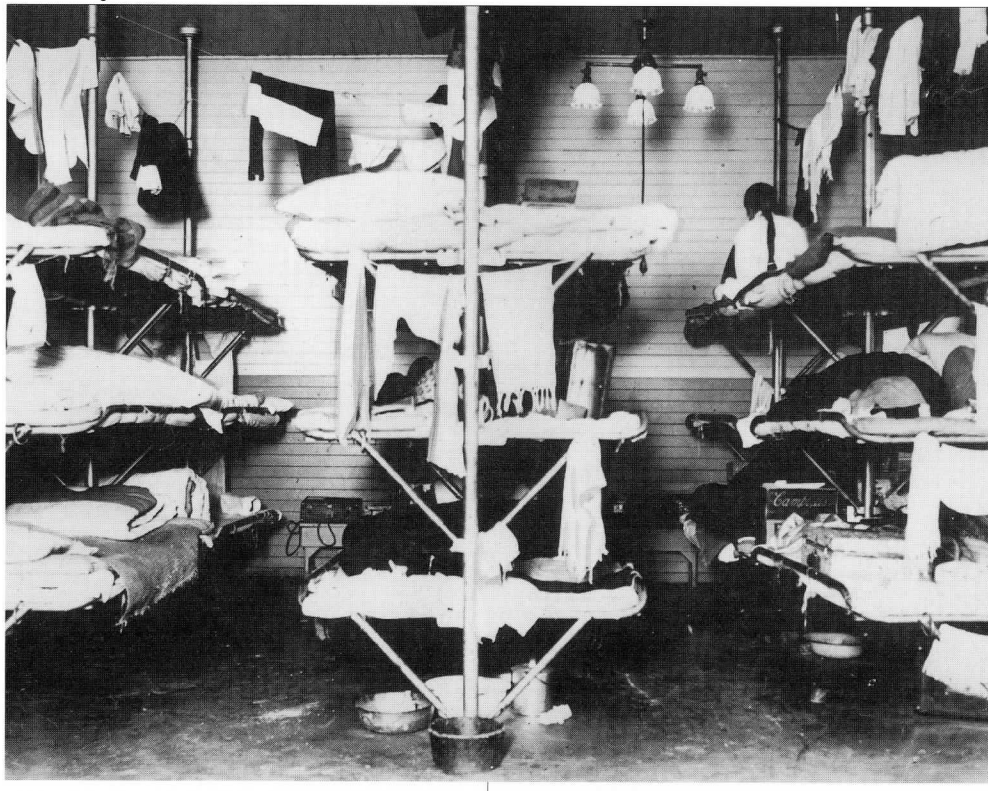

The immigration of Chinese women was severely limited by the 1875 Page Law. Aimed at curbing prostitution, the Page Law also discouraged Chinese wives from joining their husbands. The ratio of women dropped sharply, to 1 in 20 Chinese immigrants. The 1906 earthquake enabled more women to apply as wives or daughters of US-born Chinese, and the ratio rose to 1 in 4. However, Chinese women were detained in Angel Island barracks for weeks or months and subjected to grueling interrogations. C. 1910s. Courtesy of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation and Paul Chow.

The scene in this historic photo has been recreated inside the detention barracks at the Angel Island Immigration Station. *See p. 19 for information on tours of the Immigration Station.*

palm trees and neatly painted structures, was deceptive. A closer look revealed locked gates, guard tower, and barbed wire-topped fences. Guards separated the immigrants by nationality and gender into tightly packed rooms with wire bunks stacked three high. The detainees were not allowed outside except during supervised exercise periods in small fenced-in yards.

So as to not corroborate testimonies, husbands and wives were prohibited from contact until cleared for entry. Boys aged 12 and under were permitted to stay with their mothers, but were separated upon their adolescence. All entrants were examined at the hospital for "loathsome" parasitic infections like trachoma or hookworm. Those infected were automatically deported, even though these conditions were easily treatable.

Food became a constant source of displeasure. In 1919, Chinese immigrants staged a riot to protest the miserable food. Mrs. Jew recalls, "Everything was thrown into a big bowl that resembled a washtub... They just steamed the food till it was like a soupy stew. After looking at it, you'd lose your appetite. There was cabbage, stewed vegetables, pork, bits of stewed meat of low quality."

"Paper Sons"

Since few Chinese immigrants qualified under the restrictive exclusion laws, the resourceful sought loopholes. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire proved to be an unexpected boon by destroying municipal birth records. Out of these ashes arose the "paper slot" system, whereby thousands of Chinese immigrants submitted claims that they were US-born citizens, or the wives or children of citizens. "Paper sons," those claiming a fictitious relationship to a US-born Chinese, prepared by memorizing coaching books - dozens of pages of detailed information sent to them before leaving China.

Immigration officials subjected only the Chinese to grueling 2-3 day interrogation sessions in an attempt to find flaws in their testimony. Typically an immigrant and his US resident sponsor, usually a real or fictitious relative, were separately asked hundreds of specific questions to prove their legitimate relationship. Typical questions asked were:

- How many windows did your house have?
- What type of bedding did your father sleep in?
- How far away was the train station from your village?
- Who lived in each of the houses surrounding yours?

The questions were so detailed that *anyone* would have had difficulty matching their answers correctly with their sponsor's. Many applicants failed to answer all the questions correctly, which allowed the immigration officials ample reason to deport them. Fortunately, the federal court system allowed immigrants the right to appeal. 90% of the immigrants landed in the United States successfully, but not without cost. While the average stay for Chinese immigrants was two weeks, those awaiting appeals may have languished on Angel Island for up to two years.

In contrast to Chinese immigrants, it was relatively easy for the Issei *to send for their wives and brides-to-be. For a time, the Japanese government actively encouraged the emigration of women. Between 1911-1920, 39% of all Japanese immigrants were women (about one-quarter of the Issei passing through Angel Island). The photo at left depicts kimono-clad wives and picture brides arriving at Angel Island.* National Archives photo, courtesy of NJAHS Archives.

Japanese Immigrants

While smaller in number than the Chinese, approximately 60,000 Japanese passed through Angel Island, many of them picture brides or returning *Kibei* (American-born but raised or educated in Japan). Growing nativism in the US pushed for the exclusion of Japanese as well as the Chinese. However, while China was weakened by internal and external turmoil, Japan was gaining diplomatic power and respect after military victories against China and Russia. Under pressure from Theodore Roosevelt, the Japanese "voluntarily" restricted the emigration of male laborers to the United States in the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907. However, a loophole allowed those already resident in the US to send for their wives and family members.

Most Japanese passed through Angel Island with little delay thanks to the diplomatic influence of the Japanese government. Mr. Ma, who passed through Angel Island in 1922. noted, "The Japanese detention quarters were next to ours. When they came to the United States, they all brought along their baggage and families. They did not need to have hearings and were free to go ashore within 24 hours. That could be because the diplomacy of a strong nation forced the lenient implementation of immigration laws."

Shasin-kekkon, the picture bride system, was a long-distance variation on the traditional *omiai-kekkon,* or arranged marriage then customary in Japan. This process enabled Japanese men to marry by proxy women from their home prefectures. At least 20,000 Japanese picture brides passed through Angel Island. However, due to continuing anti-Asian sentiments, Japan agreed to bar picture brides in the 1921 "Ladies Agreement." A few years later, the 1924 Immigration Act prohibited entry to all "aliens ineligible for citizenship," effectively halting all Asian immigration.

Unfit for Habitation?

Within a year of the Immigration Station's opening, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce called for an investigation of conditions. Over the years numerous examiners found inadequate sanitation, fireproofing, dormitory and hospital conditions. Water service on the small island was inadequate, requiring water to be barged in. By 1922 the facilities had been declared filthy and unfit for human habitation by the Asst. Secty. of Labor and the Commissioner General of the Immigration Department.

Demonstrating the Immigration Station's fitness as a prison rather than a gateway, the facility incarcerated German crew members during WWI. Then, for nine years prior to the completion of Alcatraz in 1934, federal prisoners were held on the second floor of the dormitory building. The complex was also the site of the 1935-39 deportation hearings for Harry Bridges, the Austrialian-born leader of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.

Despite numerous proposals to relocate the station to the mainland,

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official inertia delayed a decision. On August 12, 1940, a fire raged through the administration building, quickly burning the wooden complex and finally bringing truth to the many complaints that the Immigration Station was a firetrap. The 223 detainees in custody were transferred to a replacement immigration dormitory in San Francisco.

As the United States entered World War II, the US Army transformed the Immigration Station's detention barracks into a prisoner of war camp for Japanese, Italians and Germans. In July 1946, the island was turned over to the State of California. Structures on the island were allowed to decay until 1963, when the land was given to the California Department of Parks and Recreation to be developed into a state park.

Angel Island Redefined: Reclaiming an Asian American History

Like many *Issei* and *Nisei* interned during WWII, Angel Island survivors rarely shared stories of incarceration with their children. Paul Chow, founder of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, often told the following story. One Thanksgiving, after learning about the *Mayflower,* a young Paul asked his mother how the Chinese had arrived in America. She replied, "Angel Island – shhhhh!" in a single breath. Paul thought that "Islandshhhh" was one word! It was only much later that he realized that it was an admonishment to keep the stories of Angel Island secret.

Thus, the rediscovery of the wooden barracks of Angel Island during the Third World movement of the late 1960s was an eye-opener for the Asian American community. Exploring the dilapidated wooden barracks, park ranger Alexander Weiss noticed intricately detailed Chinese characters carved into or written on the walls. Intrigued by this cultural find, he alerted his superiors, only to learn that the buildings had already been slated for destruction. Weiss went to George Araki, his Japanese American biology professor at San Francisco State College. Together with photographer Mak Takahashi, they documented the entire site, taking over 200 photos of the intricate Chinese inscriptions. Dismissed as mere graffiti by the other rangers, most of the inscriptions read as poignant poetry for those versed in Chinese.

Sparked by the discovery, Bay Area Asian Americans formed the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee (AIISHAC). They studied the site and recommended that it be preserved for historical interpretation. In July 1976, the state legislature appropriated $250,000 to restore and preserve the barracks as a state monument.

In 1983, the renovated barracks opened to the public. Members of AIISHAC formed the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) to continue preservation and education efforts. Since then, tens of thousands of visitors pass through the immigration station yearly: primary & secondary school students, collegiate Ethnic Studies classes and Asian American student groups, immigrant workers, historians, and activists. Many learn about the state inflicted hardships of immigration history for the first time; others return to revisit their own experiences there.

Cutbacks in State Parks budgets have inhibited further large scale renovations, and time and nature have continued to ravage the buildings. Yet the memory of Angel Island continues to grow. Due to its recent designation as a National Historic Landmark, the Angel Island Immigration Station has received preservation funds from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and may soon be named one of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places."

Last September, Sen. Daniel K. Akaka (D-Hawai'i) sponsored legislation to appropriate $100,000 for a feasibility study on "preserving and interpreting sites within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area... related to immigration." As a result, the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, and the National Park Service are jointly exploring plans to interpret Pacific Rim immigration to the United States. Initiatives include 1) restoring and interpreting the Angel Island Immigration Station, and 2) creating a museum dedicated to Pacific Rim immigration to be located on the San Francisco waterfront. Quite possibly, Angel Island may truly become "the Ellis Island of the West," complementing its East Coast counterpart by telling a very different story. ■

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