

Coming to America

The poems of Angel Island shine the light on Chinese immigration to the United States.



Library of Congress
Angel Island Immigration Island

The year is 1934. Twelve-year-old Wong Kai Chong must leave everything he knows in China and travel to the United States to join his father. He lands in San Francisco, California, on a cold day and is held on Angel Island, a station for immigrants. An immigrant is a person who comes to a country to live.

On Angel Island, officials interrogate, or question, Kai. He knows his answers must match what his father said before him. If they don't, Kai will be sent back to China. His experience is detailed in the children's book Kai's *Journey to Gold Mountain*. Kai's story portrays the voyage of more than 175,000 Chinese immigrants to Angel Island from 1910 to 1940.

In December, President George W. Bush signed the Angel Island Immigration Station Restoration and Preservation Act. The law provides up to \$15 million to set up a museum and research center on the island to help tell stories like Kai's. The money will also be used to protect hundreds of poems carved in the wooden walls of the station that describe the difficult journey.

On the Border

People from China didn't always have difficulty entering the United States. The earliest Chinese immigrants arrived during the California gold rush in the 1840s and 1850s. They nicknamed the United States *Gum Saan*, or "Gold Mountain," because many of them hoped to strike it rich.

But as the number of Chinese immigrants grew, Americans became less welcoming. In 1882, the U.S. government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. The law made it almost impossible for Chinese workers to enter the United States.



Leigh Haeger
Map of Angel Island

Chinese families were detained, or forcibly held, at Angel Island while immigration officials decided whether the newcomers should be allowed to enter the United States. The process was very different from that of Ellis Island—the New York port of entry for European immigrants.

On Ellis Island, more than 95 percent of travelers were processed quickly and allowed into the United States. On Angel Island, many Chinese immigrants were held for weeks, months, and sometimes even years. After being cruelly questioned by officials, more than 30 percent of immigrants were sent back to China.

Poems of the Past

Angel Island's doors closed in 1940 when China and the United States became allies, or partners, during World War II (1939-1945). The island's main immigration station was scheduled to be destroyed in the 1970s until a park ranger found poetry carved in its walls. The poems described the frustration and sadness that many people felt during their stay at Angel Island.

Later this year, the poems will literally be brought to light. Angel Island's main buildings will reopen to the public, and the poems will be lit up for all to see.

"Angel Island shows a different, but equally important, side of immigration," Erika Gee, education expert at the Angel Island Immigration Foundation, told *Weekly Reader*. "We hope that Angel Island becomes a bookend to Ellis Island."

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