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## Angel Island and the Poetics of Error

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*The black Africans who survived the dreaded "Middle Passage" from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone. Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations, these Africans nevertheless carried with them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music, their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance. . . . At that liminal crossroad of culture contact and ensuing difference . . . Africa meets Afro-America.*

—Henry Louis gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*

*In the translation...lies the  
disappeared history of distinctions in  
another space...full of the movements  
of languages and peoples still in  
historical sedimentation at the bottom,  
waiting for the real virtuality of our  
imagination.*

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death  
Discipline*

Written on the walls of the wooden barracks of the detaining station on Angel Island off the coast of San Francisco, Angel Island poems delineate historical trajectories that are in many ways unaccountable in canonical discourses.<sup>1</sup> They belie the pitfalls of teleological History by virtue of their modes of inscription. It is the burden of this essay to describe these specific modes of inscription, their inherent subversive poetics, and their imbrication with marginalized forms of historical imagination. I want to look at these poems as examples of *tibishi* (poetry on the wall), a traditional Chinese form of travel writing that provides an outlet for the large social sector which is denied the right to write history. Seen by its cultural function, *tibishi* in the case of Angel Island poetry becomes indistinguishable from graffiti, a

scriptural practice that is sometimes condemned as vandalism and at other times commissioned as artwork. Not understanding the scriptural economy of these poems has led to a reductive hermeneutics in the hitherto efforts of transcribing, translating, and interpreting them. This kind of hermeneutics may sit well with an economic system that favors productive abstraction and with a political system that recognizes only fully-fledged citizen-subjects, but it lies at odds with what I call the poetics of error. Characterized by misspellings, misattributions, and mistranslations, the poetics of error in these poems has significant linguistic, historical, and cross-cultural implications. Read differently, as I will show, misspellings spell out linguistic nonconformity and the fictionality of standard orthography, misattributions can be attributed to folk revisions of authorized history and intentional conflations of cultural origins, and mistranslations translate code-switching and heteroglossia. Understood this way, the poetics of error echoes the liminality as well as subversity of the anonymous poets' status in a world delineated by expansionist or nationalist historiography.

The discovery of what we now call Angel Island poems is a remarkable story:

The Chinese detention barrack on Angel Island, a two-story wood building located on a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay, stood abandoned for more than two decades until it was finally marked by the government for destruction. In 1970, park ranger Alexander Weiss noticed characters inscribed on the walls inside and concluded they were writings left by Chinese immigrants once detained there for questioning. Weiss informed his superiors but they did not share his enthusiasm or belief in the significance of the calligraphy on the walls. Weiss contacted Dr. George Araki of San Francisco State University, who along with San Francisco photographer Mak Takahashi went out to the island and photographed practically every inch of the barrack walls that bore writing, most of which was poetry. Their discovery soon sparked enough local Asian American community interest to lobby for its preservation, and in 1976 the Legislature appropriated \$250,000 for the preservation of the building.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, more than one hundred and thirty-five calligraphic poems have survived. But the exact number is impossible to tell, partly because many of the poems are barely legible and have thus not been

transcribed, and partly because the transcribers do not always agree as to where one poem ends and another begins on the wall. The following photographic image of the inscription (see figure 1), for instance, may appear to be one poem with a one-line space in between. But a close reading of the tones and meters of the two quatrains reveals that they are in fact two different poems.<sup>3</sup> Such a feature of textual instability actually pertains to one of the most important literary genres in which history and writing remain entangled: Chinese travel writing.

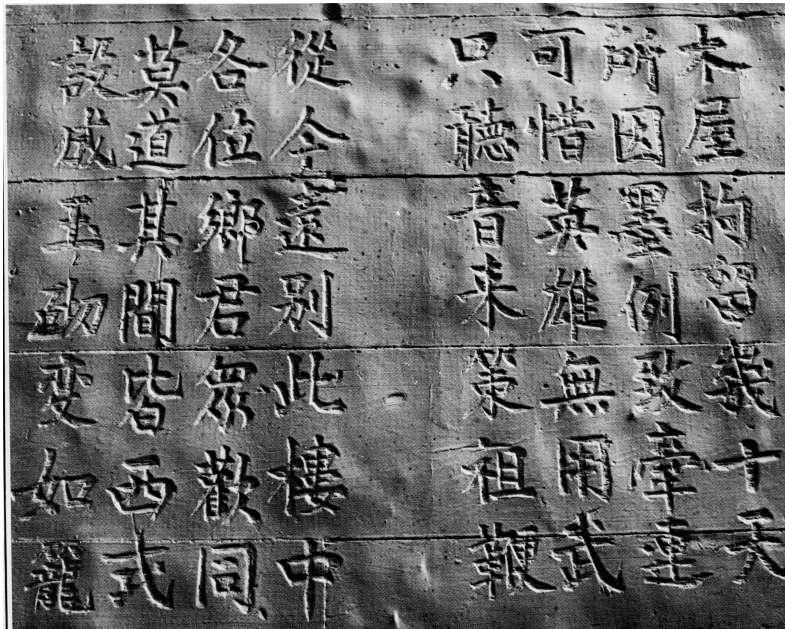


Figure 1. Angel Island Poetry

I modify the otherwise generic term "travel writing" by adding "Chinese" in order to emphasize the specificity of this literary tradition in China, the specificity of Chinese travelogue's uneasy relation to historical writing as determined by the particular politics of Chinese historiography. Throughout imperial China, historical writing was subject to the court's authorization and domination. Only court-appointed historians were allowed to write and publish "history." The private compilation of historical facts in book format often led to imprisonment or other forms of physical punishment of the unauthorized historian. Travel writing thus provides an important outlet for writers who desire to make historical references but are forbidden to produce what may be deemed as historical accounts. The sites that the writers visit, be they relics, ruins, monuments, or natural resorts, are usually haunted by historical memories. A visit to these sites triggers some thoughts on the writer's part, thoughts that are historical comments in essence but disguised as random observations of a traveler. Take for instance the following four-line poem by the famous Tang poet Du Mu:

過華清宮  
杜牧

長安回望繡成堆  
山頂千門次第開  
一騎紅塵妃子笑  
無人知是荔枝來

PASSING THE HUAQING PALACE

Piles of embroidery seen afar from Chang'an,  
mountain-top a thousand gates open one by one.  
A steed above the red dust, a concubine smiling,  
no one knows it's the litchi coming.<sup>4</sup>

The Huaqing Palace was a well-known entertainment place for Ming Emperor of Tang Dynasty and his concubine, Yang Guifei. The emperor's obsession with his *la femme fatale* almost ruined the Dynasty, and he was forced by his rebellious army to order her suicide. Notorious for doting on his concubine, the emperor set up a special express delivery route all the way from Canton in the south to the capital, Chang'an, in the north (an ancient Chinese version of today's Fedex) in order to bring her fresh litchi, which grew only in the south. Embedded in this poem is unmistakably the poet's severe criticism of the debauchery and corruption of the emperor, and this poem constitutes in essence a historical comment on a previous reign of the Dynasty. But the criticism is couched within a poem and the

severity of historical commentary is camouflaged by a title which gives an almost casual, occasional feeling: "*Passing* the Huaqing Palace." "Passing" designates the poem as an incidental piece, a vignette of travelogue, which is generically differentiated from historical writing. But in an atmosphere in which historical writing is tightly controlled, travelogue provides a tool for the writer to comment on history. As Richard E. Strassberg puts it in his study of Chinese travel writing, "When a traveler adopted the narrative persona of the historian, he was appropriating a potent form of literary authority."<sup>5</sup> The potency comes from the inherent authority of history and from the fact that it is historical commentary disguised as travel writing: history *passing* for travelogue.

The tantalizing relation between history and travelogue is reincarnated in the body of Angel Island poetry. Needless to say, these poems, composed by those who were being incarcerated and interrogated in humiliating ways, occupy a most marginal cultural space. Their three-decade-long existence in complete oblivion before coming to light on the brink of destruction testifies to their marginality and fragility. But just as travel writing seems marginal within the Chinese literary canon but remains subversive in its function as alternative history, Angel Island poems demonstrate the tenacity with which the powerless take advantage of the power of writing and



inscribe themselves into the fabric of history, or rather, tear the fabric apart. For us to recapture this tenacity, it is necessary to look at these poems not only as Chinese travel writing in general but also as its special subgenre—題壁詩 (*tibishi*).

Literally "poetry inscribed on the wall," *tibishi* has been an important form of composing and disseminating poems in Chinese literary history. The space for inscription is actually not limited to "walls"; poems written on cliffs, rocks, doors, windows, rafters, and even snow fields also belong to this genre. At inns and roadside pavilions, where travelers usually stop for a rest, there were even special kinds of "poetry boards" set up for the convenience of the poetically inspired.<sup>6</sup>

On the walls of the wooden barracks where the Chinese immigrants were detained, there were no "poetry boards," although the sense of transition one felt at a modern-day detaining station was surely as strong as at the roadside pavilions of ancient times. And the poetic desire thus inspired was equally deep. The detainees carved poems with knives and used brushes to paint them over so that the words would be legible. Many of these poems self-consciously address themselves and the others as *tibishi*:

壁上題詩過百篇  
看來皆是嘆迍邐

Over a hundred poems are on the walls.

Looking at them, they are all pining at the delayed progress. (62-63)

Or,

壁牆題詠萬千千  
盡皆怨語及愁言

There are tens of thousands of poems composed on these walls.

They are all cries of complaint and sadness. (66-67)

And they are all meant to be read by the other detainees who will stand exactly on the same spots where the poems were composed and who share the same experiences of incarceration, frustration, and humiliation:

滿腹苦衷聊代表  
留爲紀念勵同魂

Let this be an expression of the torment which fills my belly.

Leave this as a memento to encourage fellow souls. (121-22)

Or,

梓里一看宜謹記  
寫我狂言留後知

My fellow villagers seeing this should take heed and remember,

I write my wild words to let those after me know. (162-63)

This feature of *tibishi*, in calling attention to writing as set on something (the wall) and absorbed in its material relations to its intended readers, raises questions about the politics of transcription and reading.

Undoubtedly, as the editors of the first comprehensive anthology, *Islands: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940*, have declared, these poems "express the thoughts of the individuals who wrote them" (31). For instance, the anonymous poet's frustration over being detained and sense of disappointment are evident in the following opening poem of the anthology:

水景如苔千里曲  
陸路無涯路步難  
平風到埠心如是  
安樂誰知住木樓

The sea-scape resembles lichen twisting and turning for a thousand li.

There is no shore to land and it is difficult to walk.

With a gentle breeze I arrived at the city thinking all would be so.

At ease, how was one to know he was to live in a wooden building? (34-35)

Or, as in another poem, the sadness is expressed in simple and clear language:

四壁蟲唧唧  
居人多嘆息  
思及家中事  
不覺淚沾滴

The insects chirp outside the four walls.

The inmates often sigh.

Thinking of affairs back home,

Unconscious tears wet my lapel. (54-55)

Apparently, these poems in translation pose little challenge to English readers. In apoliticized aesthetic terms, these are what Sau-Ling Wong would call "artlessly direct" poems whose significance would have to derive, as she insists, from their contents alone.<sup>7</sup> But, the illusion of their transparency, I want to suggest, is created by the editors' disregard for the modes of inscription of these poems. In the "Translators' Notes," the editors/translators, like Wong, make clear their preference of the thematic content to the formal materiality of the poems:

The form [in our translation] is oftentimes compromised in order to retain the content, which we for historical reasons

feel is our first priority. We do not claim adherence to the poets' original meters or rhyme-schemes. By imitating the poetic structure, we feel an injustice to the meaning of the poem would have been committed. (31)

What are the "historical reasons" and what is the "meaning of the poem"? The historical reasons that they have in mind, I take it, refer to the political urgency of publishing a body of ethnic writing that has been historically underrepresented. These are undoubtedly "historical" records, and important ones at that; but in choosing content over form, the editors seem to have forgotten to consider the particular ways in which these poems, as *tibishi*, pose a threat to canonical historical narratives: their inscription resists hermeneutic containment.<sup>8</sup>

Take the following poem for instance:

元月動程赴墨洲  
船位阻延到中秋  
一心指望頻登埠  
年關將及在此樓

In January I started to leave for Mexico.

Passage reservations delayed me until mid-autumn.

I had wholeheartedly counted on a quick landing at the  
city,

But the year's almost ending and I am still here in this building. (167)

Except for being a simple narrative of the poet's long delayed journey, what else does the poem say, or what is the meaning of this poem? The editors of *Island* relegate this poem to the "Appendix" of the anthology, perhaps because the poem says almost nothing significant; it expresses some frustration, but the frustration lacks the kind of thematic intensity found in other poems. Here we could resort to the notion of "minority literature" as propagated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the notion that language in minority writing stops being "representative" and that its poetic and political efficacy comes more from the physicality and opacity of the language rather than from the transparency of its semantics.<sup>9</sup> But we would have to apply the French theory advisedly. "Genres, like most other things," Masao Miyoshi reminds us, "are specific to history and geography."<sup>10</sup> One of the points I have tried to raise so far in this chapter by demonstrating the embeddedness of Angel Island poetry in the Chinese literary tradition is precisely to foreground the importance of knowing the contingent origins of cultural practices in our study of transnational literature, the necessity of recognizing, as Miyoshi puts it, "the form's native visage and lineage" (36). In other words, to have a better view of the liminal crossroads of culture at which Angel Island poetry stands, we need to

know not only the historical facts of Chinese immigration to the United States, but also the Chinese literary tradition out of which this poetry has originated and against which the poetry must be interpreted. I put "contingent" before the word "origin" because such an origin *is* contingent: ultimately, as I will show, the poetry transgresses and unsettles the boundaries of that origin, just as it does to Liang's and Twain's nationalist historical frameworks. But for now let me stay, if only for a moment, within the confines of Chinese poetics and try to explain how we should read the simple poem just encountered, a poem that seems to have nothing to say.

Our problem lies precisely in the word "say." It is impossible for me to unfold in this short lecture the vast array of connotations of this simple term, connotations ranging from the Taoist notion of "Tao is unsayable" to Heidegger's *Sagen* or *Dichtung*. Instead, I would like to limit my discussion to the notion of 詩言志 (*shi yan zhi*), which ostensibly is the first Chinese definition of poetry and which has remained the key concept in Chinese literary criticism. Translated variously as "poetry says the mind," or "poetry expresses human nature," the statement proposes an expressive-affective conception of poetry, as opposed to the mimetic-representative conception in the Western tradition. "The poem is that to which what is intently on the

mind goes," says the "Great Preface" to *The Book of Songs*, "In the mind its being intent; coming out in language, it is a poem." Sounding very much like the Wordsworthian notion that "Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," the Chinese conception, however, is based on a philosophical tradition significantly different from that on which Romanticism was predicated and with which Romanticism had struggled. The key difference lies between the Chinese monistic world-view and Western dualism: whereas Chinese believe that the cosmic principle or Tao "is totally immanent in this world, and there is no suprasensory realm that lies beyond, is superior to, or is different in kind from the level of physical beings," the Western tradition proposes a dichotomy of exterior phenomena and interior or transcendental essence.<sup>11</sup> If this schematization of the philosophical difference sounds crude and simplistic—I admit it is<sup>12</sup>—the divergence between the consequent views of poetry may be more specific: "poem," with its Greek roots in *poiêma* and *poein* (to make), suggests an object made, an outside separated from an inside; by contrast, *shi*, the Chinese word for poetry or poem, is not an object made by the writer but IS the writer. As Stephen Owen points out, *shi yan zhi* may well be a tautological statement. The word 詩 (*shi*) consists of 言 (*yan*) and 寺 (*si*); if we interpret the latter component



as 志 (*zhi*) by a pseudo-etymology as well as homophony, then the Chinese statement merely repeats itself internally, without giving a real definition of poetry, just as the Greek statement tautologizes itself: "A poem ('to make') is a thing made."<sup>13</sup> Hence, we may legitimately interpret *shi yan zhi* as meaning "poetry says," with a stress on the intransitive verb, just as Heidegger has emphasized *saying* in philosophical hermeneutics. This emphasis, not on something out there to be represented by a poem, but on the act of saying itself brings us back to the aforementioned Angel Island poem, which seems to say nothing.

The fact that the anonymous poet has given us very little to work with in reading his poem only foregrounds the greater fact that he wrote a poem on the wall, tried to express some feelings, and left traces of himself. This is not to collapse literature with sociology, but to suggest that one of the significant ways literature acquires its social function is through its modes of inscription. A poem inscribed on the walls of a detaining center by an inmate in that particular context need not, in some ways, say much in order to be historically effective. It may sound strange to put the matter this way, but such a poem, as *tibishi*, which in turn provides a marginalized form of historical writing, challenges us to confront the material properties of the graphic space.

If the existence of masterpieces in literary history relies explicitly or implicitly on the notion of an abstracted and infinitely transmissible text, tibishi calls this notion into question. It seems that these poems achieve their efficacy more through their physical traces than by being beyond these traces; they draw our attention to the act of their saying and not merely to what they say. This feature puts them in close alliance with another form of writing that is often criminalized but resists political/thematic containment—graffiti.

When labeled as vandalism, graffiti constitute a crime of writing. By means of defacement, they intentionally violate property rights. As such, graffiti exhibit, in the words of Susan Stewart, "a stylization inseparable from the body, a stylization that, in its impenetrable 'wildness,' could surpass even linguistic reference and serve purely as the concrete evidence of an individual existence and the reclamation of the environment through the label of the personal."<sup>14</sup> When conceived as artwork, however, graffiti join the ranks of commodity and lose their signature of cultural resistance. The so-called tags, which used to provide clues for the police to track down and crack down inveterate vandals, have now become signatures of commodifiable authenticity. The history of collecting, editing, and anthologizing tibishi shows a similar process of personalization and depersonalization, legitimization and delegitimization. Poems by canonical authors are often copied and

preserved whereas the ones by anonymous authors get ignored and erased. Hence, canonization of tibishi is also a process of commodification that changes the nature of the scriptural economy associated with "writing on the wall," relocating traces of inscription from the site of destructive "doodling" to the domain of productive labor.

As we saw earlier, Angel Island poems were on the brink of destruction because the park ranger's superiors considered them as meaningless graffiti (the task of maintaining a public park consists, let me remind you, of erasing from public space unauthorized inscriptions and erecting in the same space signs of utter oxymoron, such as "Do Not Write on Walls."). The process of transcribing and publishing these poems is inevitably in danger of replicating the process of legitimization and delegitimization which the original inscriptions have questioned with their defiant opacity, with their status as vandalistic graffiti and not just reproducible poems with recuperable themes and thoughts. The potency and efficacy of these poems thus come from their form rather than their content, from their occupying an ambivalent space between a form of vandalism to be condemned and a form of historical record to be preserved. That ambivalence is what the hitherto efforts of transcribing, translating, and publishing these poems have missed.

Perhaps as appropriate to the ambivalence, these poems also carry out nonstandard linguistic practices, ranging from misspellings to incorrect uses of phrases, ungrammatical sentences, uses of vernacular, neologisms that result from imperfect translations, and incorrectly attributed references. All these features Mikhail Bakhtin would have celebrated as "heteroglossia," features that he has attributed almost exclusively to novels but that actually abound in other carnivalesque genres such as folk narratives, graffiti, and tibishi.

In the published editions, the transcribers and editors of Angel Island poetry painstakingly try to "correct" the somewhat corrupted texts that do not adopt standard linguistic practices. The notes to the Chinese version of the poems in the anthology are full of "errata," which identify the original errors that have since been "corrected." One "factual error" identified by the editors appears in this poem, entitled "Inscription About a Wooden Building" (for Chinese original, see the next page):

A building does not have to be tall; if it has

    windows, it will be bright.

Island is not far, Angel Island.

Alas, this wooden building disrupts my

    travelling schedule.

Paint on the four walls are green,

And green is the grass which surrounds.  
It is noisy because of the many country folk,  
And there are watchmen guarding during the night.  
To exert influence, one can use a square-  
holed elder brother.

There are children who disturb the ears,  
But there are no incoherent sounds that  
cause fatigue.

I gaze to the south at the hospital,  
And look to the west at the army camp.

This author says, "What happiness is there in this?"

The editors' note reads: "The writer here appears to be confused in his directions. The long axis of the barracks building runs roughly in an eastern-western direction. The occupants can see the hospital to the north from windows in the building's north wall. Looking east, the Ft. McDowell buildings can be seen. No building can be seen from the south wall windows which face the hillside" (70).

As the editors have correctly noted, this poem imitates "Loushi Ming" ("Inscription about a Humble House") by the famous Tang poet Liu Yuxi (772-842 A.D.). For the sake of comparison, let me put Liu's poem alongside the Chinese version of this Angel Island poem:

Liu Yuxi, "Inscription About a Humble House"

陋室銘

山不在高，有仙則名；  
水不在深，有龍則靈。  
斯是陋室，唯吾德馨。  
苔痕上階綠，草色入帘青。  
談笑有鴻儒，往來無白丁。  
可以調素琴，閱金經。  
無絲竹之亂耳，無案牘之勞形。  
南陽諸葛廬，西蜀子雲亭。  
孔子雲：“何陋之有？”

Anonymous, "Inscription About a Wooden Building"

木屋銘

樓不在高，有窗則明；  
島不在遠，煙治埃崙。  
嗟此木屋，阻我行程。  
四壁油漆綠，週圍草色青。  
喧譁多鄉里，守夜有巡丁。  
可以施運動，孔方兄。  
有孩子之亂耳，無咕嗶之勞形。  
南望醫生房，西瞭陸軍營。  
作者雲：“何樂之有？”

Figure 2. A Comparison of Two Poems

As we see, the latter follows the former closely by replicating some of the key words and the rhyme-schemes. The line that the editors believe to have indicated confusion in direction duplicates the two directional words in Liu's poem: south and west. As I said earlier, a crucial feature of Chinese travel writing is that it enables marginalized, unauthorized writers to inscribe themselves into the fabric of history. As Liu's poem is one of the paragons of Chinese literary classics, the anonymous Angel Island poet's effort to imitate closely is evidently an attempt to appropriate the kind of authority embodied in Liu's poem. Compared with intertextual references which transmit textual efficacy and authority, facts such as What lies in which direction in one's vision may seem of lesser significance.

Viewed differently, however, the seemingly trivial factual reference played a crucial part in these detainees' lives. The poetics of error was actually a dangerous drama that they lived and performed every day. As we know, most of them were detained as a result of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which effectively banned legal immigration of Chinese laborers and allowed only family-based immigration in addition to a few other categories. Many of these detainees were the so-called paper sons—they claimed to be descendents of a native-born U.S. citizen. According to historians, the paper-son scheme began in the 1880s when Chinese merchants brought over fake sons. In the 1890s, Chinese began taking advantage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which grants citizenship to anyone born in the United States and their foreign-born children. Villages in Southern China developed a sophisticated paper-son slot system and sent over thousands of people every year to claim nativity in the United States. Such a wide-scale immigration fraud led one federal judge to comment in 1901, "if the story told in the courts were true, every Chinese woman who was in the United States twenty-five years ago must have had at least 500 children." In order to stop the trend, immigration officers who interviewed the Chinese applicants resorted to an interrogation procedure that involved examinations "covering family history, relationship, village life, and other matters

which should be of common knowledge to the applicant and his witnesses," a procedure that the Angel Island detainees would have had to go through. The detainees were regularly questioned about a wealth of legally irrelevant minutiae, as the following transcript shows:

Q: How many houses are there on your row, the first one?

A: Three. One of them is tumbled down.

Q: Which one is that?

A: The third one of the last one of the row.

Q: Who lives in the second one of your row?

A: Mah Sin Ick.

Q: What does he do?

A: He is dead.

Q: When did he die?

A: He died when I was a small boy.

Q: Did he leave a family?

A: Yes, he left two sons. His wife is dead also.

Q: When did she die?

A: I don't remember. She died long ago.

Q: What are the boys' names?

A: Mah Quock You, Mah Quock Him. I don't know the age of Quock



You. Quock Him is over ten.

Q: Is the oldest one married?

A: No.

Q: Who takes care of them in that house?

A: The older brother has gone to Siam. The younger  
one is now  
working in Kung Yick village.

Q: Does anybody occupy that house?

A: No, it is empty.

Q: Then your house is the only house occupied on that  
row?

A: Yes.

Q: Who lives in the first house of the second row?

A: Mah Kong Kee.<sup>15</sup>

The same set of questions would be asked of each of the other applicants from the same village, and the answers would have to match, or all of them would be denied entry to the U.S. Here what Clifford Geertz would have called "local knowledge," as demanded by these questions should remind us of the poem, "Inscription About a Wooden Building": What building lies in which direction?

Most of the applicants came with "coaching notes," which they had to remember by rote (see figure 3). The questions were so absurdly detailed and irrelevant that they sometimes even confused the "real" applicants and not the paper sons. Hence all potential immigrants, both the real and the fake, would have to rely on common coaching notes that provide them with detailed local knowledge about their village. In this case, errors are no longer factual but performative, a result of either incorrect memory of the coaching notes or successful acquisition of textual knowledge. Errors, then, were the thin ice on which every detainee on Angel Island would have to tread every day.

白問世村有小价在  
 白問世村有幾個炮樓  
 白問世村有幾間讀書館  
 白問世前也是何村  
 白問世村右邊是何山  
 白問世村左邊是何村離幾遠  
 白問世村右邊是何村離幾遠  
 白答曰我村無小价  
 白答曰東邊村角一炮樓子。南邊  
 村角一炮樓子。眾人館側以  
 一大炮樓。今有三炮樓。  
 白答曰有三間讀書館。男在眾  
 人館。女在鴻富館。  
 白答曰前兩座地闊有龍江里  
 白答曰潯陽山向北  
 白答曰龍興里向北。離我村一里。  
 白問世村右邊是何村離幾遠  
 白答曰朝陽里向北。離我村一里。

Figure 3. "Coaching Notes"

"Not to know that a hind had no horn," says Aristotle, "is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically."<sup>16</sup> As opposed to empirical error, Aristotle suggests that artistic merit be the standard for evaluating a work of art, a standard that, as we know from his *Poetics*, gives value to poetry and a legitimate social position to poets, who

may otherwise have been expelled from Plato's Republic. But graffiti, before being commodified and institutionalized, are not works of art. On the contrary, as Stewart remarks, graffiti "form a critique of the status of all artistic artifacts, indeed a critique of all privatized consumption, and carry out that threat in full view, in repetition, so that the public has nowhere to look, no place to locate an averted glance" (*Crimes* 228). The so-called errors in Angel Island poems thus raise the question of where, if anywhere, we can locate securely our averted glance of hermeneutics, about whether regarding them as historical documents or literary texts whose efficacy derives mainly from their contents has actually deprived them of their unique mode of being historical.

This important question has been completely avoided in the ongoing canonization of these poems. Appearing in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, for instance, these poems are printed only in English translations.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, in this monolingual version, the poetics of error is never an issue; instead, the poems are made to appear clean, conforming to the horizontal linearity of English poetry, and easy to understand with the help of footnotes. Indeed, they have become finished products ready for "privatized consumption," a hermeneutic practice that graffiti originally intend to unsettle. Thus, the translation unwittingly becomes a

filtering process, eerily resembling procedures on Angel Island, where the detainees underwent medical examinations, interrogations, and were divided into categories of the admissible and the inadmissible. The irony is as deep as the errors are unmistakable.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of my completed book manuscript, entitled "*The Deadly Space Between*": *Literature and History in the Age of Transpacific Imagination*.

<sup>2</sup> Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, Judy Yung, ed. and trans., *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940* (originally published in 1980; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Te-hsing Shan, "Angel Island Poetry" in *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, eds. Werner Sollors and Marc Shell (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 577-81, 729-31. For a longer version of Shan's essay (in Chinese), see his "'Yi wo ailun ru quanwo': Tianshidao beigede mingke yu zaixian" ("I am ashamed to be curled up like a worm on Island": Inscription and Representation in Angel Island Poetry), in He Wenjing and Shan Te-hsing, ed., *Zaixian zhengzhi yu huayi meiguo wenxue* (The Politics of representation and Chinese-American literature; Taipei, Taiwan: Zhongyang Yajiuyuan Omei Yanjiusuo, 1996), 1-56.

<sup>4</sup> The English translation of this poem is taken from my own book, *Shi: A Radical Reading of Chinese Poetry* (New York: Roof Books, 1997), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Richard E. Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Luo Zongtao, "Tangren tibishi chutan" (A Preliminary study of tibishi of the Tang Dynasty), *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 47 (1991): 153-83. In English, Judith T. Zeitline's recent essay "Disappearing Verses: Writing on Walls and Anxieties of Loss" contains wonderful case studies of tibishi (Judith T. Zeitline and Lydia H. Liu, ed. *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003]), 73-132.

<sup>7</sup> Sau-ling C. Wong, "The Politics and Poetics of Folksong Reading: Literary Portrayals of Life under Exclusion," in *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 253.

<sup>8</sup> In my *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

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2002), I study a similar case in which Chinese poetry is often treated thematically by the English translators who ignore the politics of the poetic form. See chapter 6 of the book, 164-82.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Masao Miyoshi, *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 32.

<sup>12</sup> There has been a very useful debate in Chinese studies over the exact nature of such comparisons. Scholars such as Stephen Owen, Pauline Yu, and Francois Jullien would take the alleged cultural differences as givens or results of knowledge, whereas Haun Saussy and Lognxi Zhang have expressed skepticism over such contrasts. Saussy, for instance, convincingly argues that "If the Chinese thinkers are the antithesis (or the antidote) of the Greeks, it is we who make them so...The lack emerges from a comparative project" (*The Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press], 113. Saussy's earlier work, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), is one of the best studies of the term *shi yan zhi*. I will address this issue of contrast in the epilogue of this book.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 212.

<sup>15</sup> Chinese Exclusion Case Files #21685/1-16. Quoted in Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and China, 1882-1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), XXV.5.

<sup>17</sup> "Carved on the Walls: Poetry by Early Chinese Immigrants," in Paul Lauter, general editor, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, fifth edition, Volume D (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 1873-81. This section of the anthology is selected from *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, edited by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. The same editors provided the headnotes.