

A Confucian Interpretation of Moral Critique in Selected Angel Island Detention Poems

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ABSTRACT

Between 1910 and 1940, Chinese immigrants detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station carved poems into the walls of their barracks, creating one of the few surviving first-person records of the Chinese exclusion era. Scholars have interpreted these poems as expressions of suffering, homesickness, dignity, and collective identity. Drawing on selected poems in Charles Egan's *Voices of Angel Island*, this paper examines how terms associated with crime and blame (罪/咎), loyalty and integrity (忠/節), filial piety, and learning and governance (學問/經綸) may be interpreted through a Confucian moral framework. Rather than claiming that the poets consciously articulated a systematic Confucian philosophy, the paper argues that this vocabulary supports a reading of the poems as moral critiques of the United States exclusion and detention system and, more tentatively, of the social and political conditions surrounding migration from China.

Keywords: Chinese Exclusion Act; Angel Island; Confucianism; Asian American history; immigration; moral governance; detention poetry

INTRODUCTION

Between 1910 and 1940, Chinese immigrants held at the Angel Island Immigration Station wrote poems on the wooden walls of their barracks. These inscriptions constitute one of the few surviving first-person records of the Chinese exclusion era. *Voices of Angel Island*, compiled by Charles Egan, includes 135 of these poems in Chinese as well as their English translations (1). The poems, which followed traditional five- and seven-character verse forms, were mainly written by male detainees from Guangdong Province. Classical education

and Confucian moral traditions remained influential in late imperial and early Republican China, although access to formal schooling and levels of textual learning varied substantially by region and social background (14, 15). The educational backgrounds of individual Angel Island poets cannot always be established. Migration from Guangdong during this period was also closely connected to transnational family networks and obligations, providing important context for understanding recurring themes of filial responsibility in the poems (12, 13). This paper examines how several poems may be interpreted through the lens of Confucian moral discourse in addressing the experience of exclusion. Existing scholarship has persuasively interpreted the Angel Island poems as expressions of suffering, dignity, exile, and collective identity. This paper offers a complementary reading: the repeated use of terms such as 罪, 咎, 忠, 節, 學問, and 經綸 supports an interpretation in which some detainees drew upon

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classical moral language associated with the Confucian tradition to evaluate the injustices of exclusion. In this reading, the poems reframe exclusion as a failure of moral order, most directly criticizing the United States system that confined and deported the detainees. Some poems may also reflect more indirect disappointment with the conditions surrounding migration from China, although that interpretation is less clearly supported by the textual evidence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Angel Island was a place of discrimination under the Chinese Exclusion Act and its subsequent extensions. Chinese exclusion developed into a broad system of racialized gatekeeping involving documentary scrutiny, surveillance, detention, and deportation (2, 8). It was unlike Ellis Island, where most European immigrants passed through quickly. Chinese immigrants were often held for weeks or months at a time (2). In *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*, Lee and Yung describe a hearing process akin to a cross-examination, where immigrants' documents were closely scrutinized, and applicants were questioned in detail about their families and home villages. Discrepancies between testimonies or documents could be used as grounds for denying admission (2, 11). These procedures operated within a broader exclusion regime that helped construct Chinese migrants as legally inadmissible or deportable subjects, which gave immigration officials substantial authority over the admissibility of Chinese migrants and sharply limited opportunities for entry (8, 9, 10). Medical examinations could also be used to deny entry (2). Immigrants were also held apart according to race and sex, they slept in locked dormitories similar to jail cells, and their mail was censored (2). The poems emerged from an enforcement system shaped by racialized suspicion, intensive documentation requirements, medical inspection, prolonged waiting, surveillance, and humiliation.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Scholarship on the Angel Island poems has interpreted the inscriptions as historical testimony, literary expression, collective identity, and alternative historical narratives (3, 4, 7). Heping Zhao argues that the act of carving the poems was a means for the immigrants to retain their dignity and express a collective voice that was grounded in traditional Chinese literature (3). Yu-

Ju Hung argues that the poems were carved to show the other side of the story, where immigrants used the poems to connect the detainees' experience to earlier moments of exile and endurance like the banishment of Qu Yuan (4). These arguments are compelling, but the language of the poems reveals other layers. The poems may be read as doing more than expressing suffering. The moral vocabulary of the poems may also be read as contributing to a critique of the detainees' treatment.

The terms 忠, 節, 學問 and 經綸 also circulated broadly in classical poetry, exile literature, and general moral discourse and therefore should not be treated as uniquely or exclusively Confucian. The analysis that follows uses Confucian moral thought as one possible interpretive framework rather than as proof that the poets consciously adhered to a systematic philosophical tradition.

CONFUCIAN MORAL CRITIQUE IN THE POEMS

Through the language of crime and blame, Poem 5 may be read as reframing confinement as morally illegitimate. Poem 5, written by Li Hai from Taishan, concludes his poem with the question “試問罪何執我咎” (“I ask you, what crime did I commit to deserve this?”) (1). While the beginning parts of the poem describe the confinement inside the wooden structure and the feeling of homesickness, the last line abruptly moves from sorrow to accusation. The key words here are 罪 and 咎, crime and blame. Classical Confucian political thought emphasizes the moral legitimacy of authority, the ethical cultivation of rulers, and the appropriate use of punishment. Within that framework, the poet's question can be read as demanding that authority justify the relationship between alleged wrongdoing and imposed punishment (5, 15, 16). To ask what crime has been committed is essentially demanding that authority justify itself. The speaker presents himself as being treated like a criminal despite asserting that he has committed no crime. His question is addressed outward, towards an unnamed authority, making the poem read as an indictment of the system carved into the detention wall. In this system, according to Lee and Yung, where migrants were by default presumed suspect and subjected to intense scrutiny and interrogation, the language of 罪 and 咎 may be read as reframing the detention process as unjust criminalization and therefore morally illegitimate (2).

Poem 10 extends this moral critique of the system

through the use of a classical allusion. The poem begins by speaking of the anticipation of opportunity in “the land of the Flowery Flag” (the United States), and then it shifts to the confinement in the wooden building (Angel Island) (1). But the most powerful lines speak of Zeng Yuan and Yan Lu, the forefathers of Confucius’s disciples Zengzi and Yan Hui: “當初曾元養曾子 / 誰知顏路哭顏回” (“In the beginning, Zeng Yuan raised Master Zeng [Zengzi] / Who could have known that Yan Lu would cry for Yan Hui?”) (1). These father-son allusions may place the prisoner in a lineage of filial relationships and frame his own experience in the context of family hierarchy and filial obligation, allowing for a further exploration of how his deportation impacts his filial obligations.

Migration from Guangdong was often shaped by overlapping economic and family considerations, including employment, debt, remittances, and obligations toward relatives (12, 13). As poem 10 continues: “審查之時無一語 / 故[去]收拾撥返來” (“When I was interrogated, I did not say a word, and now I am being deported”) (1). This silence in the interrogation has consequences. As described by Lee and Yung, the detainee was expected to answer detailed questions about family and village life, with failure to meet the examiners’ demands leading to deportation (2). From a Confucian interpretive perspective, deportation may be understood as disrupting the detainee’s ability to fulfill familial obligations, including economic support and care for relatives. Because the poet is unable to fulfill his filial obligation due to his detention, the poem may therefore be read as questioning the moral legitimacy of the authorities responsible for his confinement and deportation.

Filial piety constitutes an important element of Confucian ethics, but it belongs to a broader account of moral cultivation involving character, appropriate relationships, benevolence, and righteousness (5, 16, 17). One of the core pillars that allows social harmony to be maintained is to have filial relationships such as father-son to function normally (5). A system that interferes with a son’s fulfillment of filial obligation hence is morally disordered. At the same time, the decision to migrate may also point indirectly to economic or social pressures in China, but Poem 10 does not explicitly criticize the Chinese state (12). Any interpretation of China’s moral responsibility must therefore remain tentative. Thus, Poem 10 may be read most clearly as lamenting separation and evaluating the American detention system through the language of familial obligation. A broader criticism of conditions in China remains possible but is

considerably less explicit.

Poem 21 offers a more explicit contrast between the speaker’s claimed integrity and the humiliation he experiences. The poet writes, “□忠節 / □污傷” (“I am loyal and principled, but now I am shamed and wounded”) (1). The sequence of these two verses matters. The poet first establishes his own morality, only to later outline the actions of the system against the subject. Confucian ethical traditions place considerable importance on cultivated character, moral integrity, and the appropriate recognition of virtuous conduct (5, 15, 16). In declaring 忠節 (loyal integrity), the poet presents himself as possessing loyalty and integrity, qualities that support a Confucian interpretation of the contrast between moral character and degrading treatment. Yet, the state responds with 污傷 (defilement), by confining him to a hospital room only to later deport him.

This contradiction between integrity and humiliation becomes more pronounced when the poem is considered alongside the detention procedures described by Lee and Yung, whereby migrants were given medical checks and interrogations within a system structured by suspicion of fraudulent documentation and concern about disease (2). In such a process, one’s character is irrelevant. One who has integrity is processed the same way as one who has no integrity. In many Confucian accounts of good governance (in which social harmony is maintained), social harmony depends upon moral discernment, virtuous leadership, and the cultivation of ethical conduct. Within this framework, the failure to recognize the speaker’s asserted integrity may be read as evidence of defective moral judgement (5, 15, 16). In the context of the poem, however, the poet’s use of Confucian terms highlights the failure of the system. Within this Confucian interpretive framework, failure to recognize integrity may be understood as evidence of a breakdown of the moral order.

Poem 8 begins to shift from accusing the system of immoral practices to asserting the poet’s own morals. The poem begins with “量度淺狹交友無益 / ... 作事乖張聰明無益” (“It’s useless to become friends with those of narrow mind; It’s useless to show off one’s cleverness in daily affairs”) (1). These verses attack narrow-mindedness and self-conceit. Then, the poem associates 學問 with learning and cultivated understanding, while 經綸 evokes ordering capacity, statecraft, or the ability to manage affairs. These terms have broad classical literary and political meanings, but they also support a Confucian interpretation centered on learning, discernment, and governance. Although these terms may

partly reflect classical poetic convention, their placement in the poem also gives them interpretive significance. Indeed, in Confucian thought, learning underpins moral judgement, and proper order and governance depend on a moral judgement or discernment of the people rather than suspicion and coercion (5, 6, 15, 16). The detainee's use of these terms asserts his own moral judgement.

This assertion takes on particular importance in the context of Angel Island. As Lee and Yung describe, migrants underwent intensive interrogations and document checks in which inconsistencies could be used as grounds for denying admission or ordering deportation (2). From this position of authority, the officers and the detention system at Angel Island as a whole exercised institutional authority to evaluate applicants' credibility and determine their admissibility. Poem 8 challenges this presumption. If proper order and proper governance depend on not having a narrow mind and an ability to judge one's morality, the poem may be read as suggesting that the immigration system failed to embody the discernment and moral judgement associated with legitimate governance. Through its invocation of 學問 and 經綸, the poem positions the speaker as capable of evaluating the system and suggests that the authorities fall short of the standards implied by those terms. Thus, this poem supports the interpretation advanced in this paper in that it shows how people used Confucian ideals as a moral standard to evaluate and critique the injustice of detention.

Taken together, the four poems employ a recurring vocabulary of blame, filial obligation, integrity, learning, and governance. Read through a Confucian framework, this language shifts the detainees from objects of administrative judgement to moral evaluators of the institutions that confined them. The poems do not establish a single philosophical program, but they demonstrate how classical moral language could provide resources for articulating injustice under exclusion (1).

This interpretation has several limitations. The analysis is based on a small selection of poems whose authorship, educational background, and intended audience cannot always be established. It also depends on published transcriptions and translations of inscriptions, some of which contain damaged or uncertain characters. Because terms such as 忠, 節, 學問 and 經綸 circulated broadly in classical literary and moral discourse, their presence cannot by itself demonstrate conscious adherence to a systematic Confucian philosophy. The argument therefore identifies a plausible interpretive framework rather than claiming direct evidence of the poets' intentions.

CONCLUSION

The selected poems demonstrate how Angel Island detainees could use classical moral vocabulary to evaluate the institutions that judged them. Read through a Confucian framework, references to blame, filial obligation, integrity, learning, and governance reposition the detainees as moral agents rather than passive subjects of exclusion.

This interpretation complements scholarship emphasizing suffering, exile, dignity, literary expression, and collective identity by showing how inherited moral language could also function as a mode of political evaluation. It does not establish a single philosophical intention shared by all detainees; rather, it demonstrates the value of reading the inscriptions across literary, historical, and ethical contexts.

Further study could investigate this interpretation through a greater number of inscriptions, comparing those of male and female prisoners; investigating poems at other prison locations; considering other potential translations; and analyzing other religious, cultural, literary, political, and diasporic contexts alongside the Confucian interpretation proposed here.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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