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Humanities Student Symposium
April 3, 2014

Translating Identities: The Poetry of Angel Island

Translator's Note

Angel Island, which is located in the San Francisco Bay, served as the main Western point of entry for immigrants to United States from 1910 until 1940. The administration building of the Angel Island Immigration Station burned down in 1940, causing most records to be lost forever. Because of this, the total number of immigrants who passed through Angel Island is unknown, but it is estimated to be at least 100,000 and as high as 500,000 (Daniels 5). The majority of these immigrants came from China. However, immigrants came from other countries as well (Daniels 6). Chinese immigrants receive the most attention, though, because in addition to making up the majority of immigrants who arrived at Angel Island, Chinese immigrants were more likely to be detained for longer periods of time (Barde and Bobonis 112). In order to express the feelings of frustration, hopelessness and sadness that came with their extensive detainment, many Chinese immigrants turned to poetry. By carving their thoughts and feelings onto the walls, they left behind an important historical and literary record of their lives at Angel Island. This record was forgotten and almost destroyed until a California park ranger discovered the poems in 1970 (Daniels 9). In addition to helping us learn more about this often ignored piece of American history, several poems are well-crafted and valuable on their own as works of literature. The recorded poems were all written by male immigrants because the women's barracks burned down earlier. Nearly all poems are unsigned and untitled.

Chinese immigrants were much more likely to be detained at Angel Island because of the Chinese Exclusion Act and other immigration laws. The Chinese Exclusion Act, which passed in

1882 due to xenophobic views of Chinese immigrants working as laborers, barred Chinese immigration for ten years, with exceptions made for blood relatives of American-born Chinese, Chinese merchants, teachers and students. More than just outlawing the majority of Chinese immigration, the Chinese Exclusion Act excluded Chinese immigrants from attaining American citizenship. Because anti-Chinese sentiments only increased following the law's passage, a stricter version of the law called the Geary Act was passed for another ten years in 1892. In 1902, Chinese exclusion was extended indefinitely with the Scott Act, which remained in effect until 1943. Chinese immigrants were further excluded by the larger Immigration Act of 1924, which set immigration quotas based on the 1890 Census and outlawed immigration from most countries in the Asia-Pacific, as well as other related laws. This series of laws hurt Chinese immigrants as well as Chinese-Americans already living in the United States. The Geary Act required Chinese-Americans, even though they were supposed to be exempt from Chinese exclusion, to acquire certifications of residence and identity. Certificates for re-entry were also required for Chinese-Americans if they left the country. Despite these harsh restrictions, many Chinese immigrants still attempted to come to the U.S. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, conditions were so poor in China that Chinese immigrants were willing to endure the strong anti-Chinese climate in the U.S. and risk deportation in search for a better life (Lai 89). Because of the United States' long tradition of actively discriminating against Chinese immigrants, I was immediately drawn to the Angel Island poems out of historical interest. However, as I began to read and translate the poems, I started to be motivated by their aesthetic and literary qualities.

It didn't take me long to learn just how difficult it is to translate Chinese poetry. I faced several challenges related to the vast differences between Chinese and English. There were many words that I could not directly translate or the equivalent word in English did not work as well as

the original Chinese word. However, my biggest challenge was preserving the economy and compactness of the original poems. Since Chinese is a monosyllabic language with flexible syntax, Chinese poetry is very compact, dense and complex (Tsai 172). Because of this, my first step as a translator was to unpack everything in the poems to find the literal meaning. After this, I was left with the more difficult task of making the poems work in English. English translations of Chinese poems, SC Kevin Tsai says, have the tendency to consist of short, declarative sentences, which leaves the final product feeling overly simplistic and completely different from the original (Tsai 172). This was hard for me to avoid, as I'm not very experienced with poetry or a natural poet by any means. Another piece of advice that I found useful on translating Chinese poems from Tsai that was also echoed by poet and translator Tony Barnstone is the suggestion to avoid translating Chinese poems literally. I think among new translators especially there is a desire to translate literally out of respect to the author. This is something I struggled with when I began the process of translating, too. However, I soon realized that by translating poetry word-for-word, you often lose many of the poetic elements, and in this way, word-for-word translations can actually be farther away from the original. Literary translation is good for the transmission of information, but not for the recreation of literary texts (Barnstone 67). In order to recreate literature, a freer approach to translation is necessary.

There is already an existing translation of the Angel Island poems: *Island* by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim and Judy Yung, which was published in 1980. This is where I found the source text for the poems I translated. I decided that it was important to translate the poems again because of my personal interest and the approach Lai, Lim and Yung took while translating the poems the first time around. The translations of Lai, Lim and Yung are very literal and read like prose instead of poems. They very skillfully convey the meaning of each poem, but often fail to

convey the literary and aesthetic aspects. As they write in their translator's note, they decided to prioritize content over form for historic reasons (Lai et al. 31). The history behind the poems is important to me, but I saw the need for a more balanced translation that also paid attention to elegance and beauty of the Angel Island poems.

Some specific changes I made were condensing the lines, adding or altering images, removing distracting information, and rephrasing lines to strengthen them. I also altered the voice in the poems by translating lines that appeared in passive voice in the original as active voice in addition to translating lines that appeared in past tense in the original as present tense in my translations because I think it enhances the delivery in some places. Voice is very different in Chinese than in English. Therefore, to do this, I relied on my own sensibilities and interpretations of the poems. One place where I chose to translate a line that had previously appeared in passive voice in active voice is in poem 5. The last line of this poem in *Island* is translated as, "My heart is nervous with anticipation" (Lai et al. 36). I decided to translate this line, though as, "My heart races with anticipation" because I thought it made the line more powerful, thus providing the poem with the powerful conclusion I recognized in Chinese, and was more congruent with other uses of active voice in the poem. Also in poem 5, I made the decision to translate the second and third lines in present tense, while the original translators chose to use past tense. In my translation, these lines read, "Time shoots by like an arrow. / Autumn passes by like a gust of wind." The original translators translated these lines as, "Time flew like a shooting arrow. / Already, a cool autumn has passed." I did this because I wanted to create a degree of parallelism between the two similar lines and continue with the figurative language in the second line. I also altered the voice in the poems through word choice. In some of translations in *Island*, I do not agree with the word choices of the translators. For example, in poem 32, I dislike Lai, Lim and

Yung's choice of the words "anxious" and "depressed" because I think they are overly clinical. Additionally, I do not think they are pure synonyms for the original Chinese. I chose to use the words "nervous" and "dejected" instead because I think they work better and they do not have as loaded connotations.

Another way in which I distinguished my translations from the translations of Lai, Lim and Yung was by playing with line breaks. In *Island*, there are very few line breaks because the translators were trying to match the original Chinese. I do not think this works, however, because most of the lines are very long when translated. This is completely contrary to the original Chinese poems, which have very short lines because of the compactness of Chinese language and the traditional style of Chinese poetry. Because of this, adding line breaks actually makes the translations closer to the original poems. I changed the line breaks in almost all of the poems, but one specific example is in poem 14. In *Island*, the first three lines are translated as: "The night is cool as I lie on stiff on the steel bunk. / Before the window the moon lady shines on me. / Bored, I get up and stand beneath the cold window" (52). I decided to alter these lines in my translation. I translated the lines as: "Lying on the stiff, steel bunk, I take in the night. / The moon lady shines on me. Bored, / I get up to stand beneath / the cold window." These changes may appear to be simple, but I believe the line breaks add new meaning and a whole new dimension to the translation that is reflective of the original. The lines can now be read in multiple ways due to this change.

While my translations are different from the translations in *Island*, I did not drastically depart from the original text; instead, I sought to enhance what was already there. I hope I have succeeded. On an organizational note, I retained the numbering of the poems found in *Island* to provide a reference point, so that is why the numbers of my translations have gaps. I selected the

following poems to translate because I thought they were representative of the group of poems as a whole in terms of subject matter and literary style. Translating the poems of Angel Island has been both extremely challenging and rewarding. As you can see in the following translations, the people detained at Angel Island were not just faceless victims, but real people with real families, fears, hopes and dreams. It is easy to forget this, and this is why I think these translations are critically important.

My Translations

#5

Four days before the Qiqiao Festival,
I boarded the ship to America.
Time shoots by like an arrow;
Autumn passes by like a gust of wind.
I count on my fingers—
Several months have passed.
Yet my journey is far from over:
I still have not been interrogated.
My heart races with anticipation.

#7

I planned to come to America last year,
but my journey was delayed.
The day Weaver Maiden met Cowherd,
I left on the *President Lincoln*.
For twenty days, I ate wind and tasted waves.
I thought I could come ashore in a few days.
How could I know
I would become a prisoner on this island?
I can hardly stand the barbarians' abuse.
A double stream of tears flows
when I think of my family.
I hope to land in San Francisco soon,
so I will be spared anymore sorrow here.

#14: Thoughts at Mid-Autumn Festival

Lying on the stiff, steel bunk, I take in the night.

The moon lady shines on me. Bored,
 I get up to stand beneath
 the cold window.
 I count the time
 that has passed.
 It is already mid-autumn.
 We should honor and enjoy her,
 but I have no gift and feel embarrassed.

#18

Overcome by sadness, I listen
 to insects chirping and waves smacking the shore.
 How can I free myself
 from the onerous laws and my hatred?
 I have met problem after problem.
 It is worse than owning only a flute in the Marketplace of Wu.

#22

America may have power, but it lacks justice.
 We are victimized as if guilty.
 We are given no chance to explain.
 I bow my head.
 I know I can do nothing.

#27: Poem by Xu from Xiangshan Consoling Himself

Hundreds of poems cover these walls.
 They all point to setbacks.
 What can one sad person say to another?
 Struck by misfortune, we write to commiserate.
 But how can we know what is already decided?
 How can we tell if it is heaven's will?
 Why should we despair if imprisoned here?
 Heroes are often the first to face adversity.

#32

Confined on the island day after day,
 my freedom withheld.
 How can I talk about it?
 I look to see who is happy,
 but my fellow prisoners sit in silence.
 I feel nervous and dejected,
 and I struggle to fall asleep.

Days are dull and the barrack is barren.
 Nights are long and the pillow is cold.
 Who will pity me?
 After such isolation and sorrow,
 why not go home to plow the fields?

#34

Why must I sit in jail?
 Is it because my country is weak and my family poor?
 My parents wait at the door, but there is no news.
 Wrapped in a quilt, my wife and child sigh of loneliness.
 Even if I can stay in America,
 will they ever be able to join me?
 Those who venture out typically become worthless.
 How many ever return from battle?

#38

Sitting on my bunk, I open the window.
 The breeze brushes my skin,
 and the moon lights up my face. For a moment,
 I think of my homeland and native village.
 But soon, I am brought back.
 I hear geese cry in the distance.
 The lost hero can talk meaninglessly of the sword,
 and the poet with nowhere to go can anguish on an island.
 When your country is frail, your spirit slowly dies.
 Why else would we be imprisoned?

#39

Twice now, I have traveled across the ocean,
 experiencing the wind and dust of the journey.
 Imprisonment is continual agony and abuse.
 Since our country is weak, we must work together.
 It is up to us to push against the wild waves.

#65

Farewell Island, I return to Hong Kong. I will go on
 to awaken my country's consciousness.
 I will tell everyone to inform their fellow villagers:
 if they have a small surplus of food and clothing,
 they should not dare to drift across the ocean.

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