"A Bowlful of Tears" Revisited

The Full Story of Lee Puey You's Immigration Experience at Angel Island

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In 1975, a few years after the discovery of Chinese poems on the walls of the immigration barracks at Angel Island, I embarked on an oral history project with historian Him Mark Lai and poet Genny Lim to document the story of Chinese detention at Angel Island during the exclusion period. After conducting forty-five interviews with ex-detainees and staff and translating one hundred thirty-five of the Chinese poems, we published *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*. Although none of the poems was written by women, we conducted eight interviews with women, offering us a rare opportunity to hear their versions of the story as well.[1]

One of the women we interviewed was Lee Puey You, who had immigrated to the United States in 1939. She was denied entry by immigration authorities and detained at Angel Island for twenty months before she was deported. She gave us a detailed and moving account of her long stay at Angel Island. It was her refrain, "I must have cried a bowlful of tears," that I used in the title of my first article on the experiences of Chinese immigrant women at Angel Island in *Frontiers*. Little did I know then how much more complicated and sad her full story was and how our lack of experience as oral historians had made us overlook the gendered effects of exclusion on women's lives. In hindsight, we should have asked more open-ended as well as follow-up questions; covered more of her entire life history; considered race, class, gender and memory dynamics in our line of questioning and analysis; and compared her testimony to the transcripts in her immigration file at the National Archives.[2]

The following rewrite and analysis of the interview that we conducted with Lee Puey You in 1975 as part of the *Island* book project is intended to provide a fuller picture of a Chinese woman's experience at Angel Island, told in her own words, as well as a better understanding of how we can best reclaim our past through oral history. The 1975 interview is compared with a second interview with Lee that was conducted ten years later for a film production, *Carved*

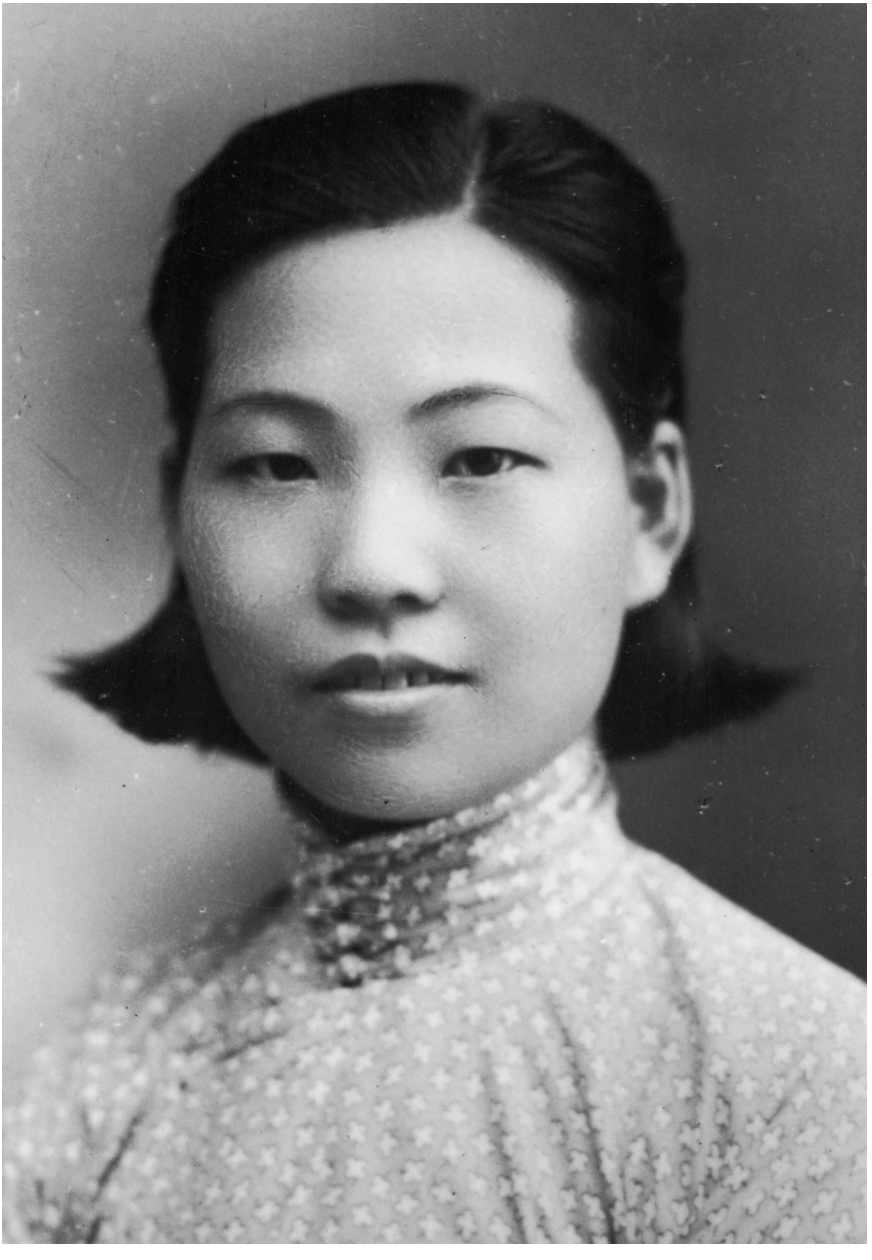
in Silence, to show what was overlooked in the first interview and the different results that come from working in the medium of film. Excerpts from a third interview conducted by an immigration officer in 1955, when Lee was threatened with deportation for fraudulent entry, are included at the end to reveal the full tragic story of her immigration and life in America that she withheld from us. I did not come across this last interview until after Lee's death in 1996.[3] While I can respect Lee Puey You's sense of privacy and desire to protect her family and us from the painful circumstances of her immigration, I include the full story here with the permission of her daughters as a testimony to the strength of character that Lee displayed in confronting institutional racism and sexual exploitation. Against such odds, she must have cried more than a bowlful of tears in her lifetime.

"A BOWLFUL OF TEARS": FIRST INTERVIEW FOR THE BOOK *ISLAND*

In 1975, we were lucky to find Lee Puey You through a mutual friend of her daughter Daisy Gin. We had heard she was detained on Angel Island for close to two years, probably the longest stay of any Chinese detainee in the history of the Angel Island Immigration Station. And she was willing to be interviewed. So one Saturday afternoon, Him Mark Lai and I, fully equipped with tape recorders and a list of questions, paid Lee Puey You a visit in her North Beach flat in San Francisco. I remember she welcomed our questions and thoughtfully answered them one by one until we ran out of questions after an hour or so.

In many ways hers was both a common and a unique story about detention life at Angel Island. Lee Puey You was born in Chung Tow village in Chungshan (Zhongshan) District, Guangdong Province, in 1916. She was twenty-three years old when she immigrated to the United States in 1939, posing as the daughter of a U.S. citizen. Once admitted, she was to marry a Chinese immigrant in the United States and prepare the way for the rest of her family to come. Unlike most Chinese women immigrating at this time, she was well educated and thus had an easier time memorizing the coaching book for the interrogation. She expected to be detained at Angel Island for a few weeks until she successfully passed the physical examination and interrogation. However, because of discrepancies in her interview and that of her alleged father, she was denied entry.[4]

Slated for deportation, Lee Puey You was told by her "relatives" that they would hire an attorney to appeal her case to higher authorities in Washington, D.C., and that she needed to be patient. The appeal went from the U.S. District Court to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, and finally to the U.S. Supreme



Lee Puey You at the time of her immigration to the United States in 1939. Published courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region.

Court, without success. By this time the war against Japan had escalated in China, and the United States was about to enter World War II on the same side as China. The hope was that Lee would be allowed to land because it would be too dangerous to send her back to China. Instead, after twenty months of confinement at Angel Island, she was deported to Hong Kong. Here, her story took another unique turn. In 1947 she returned to the United States posing as a war bride to marry the same man. The immigration station at Angel Island had since closed and been moved to San Francisco, and the Chinese Exclusion Act had been repealed. This time, she was allowed to enter immediately. But the twenty months of prison-like detainment at Angel Island had been forever etched into her mind and heart.[5]

When we interviewed Lee Puey You thirty years after her ordeal at Angel Island, she told us repeatedly how she was made to feel like a criminal and how often she cried in anguish and out of frustration. We found that because she had been there for such an unusually long time and because she was an educated woman, Lee observed and understood the detention experience at Angel Island more thoroughly than her peers. She remembered in detail the backgrounds of the women and their emotional state of mind, the poetry on the barrack walls, the interrogation process, and the ways women coped with imprisonment. Mindful of the psychological scars of Angel Island that she still bore, Him Mark Lai and I treaded carefully, perhaps too cautiously, in asking our prepared list of questions. As a result, we saw only a partial picture of the circumstances of her immigration to the United States. Nevertheless, the following is what she told us about what happened to her at Angel Island. The original interview in Chinese has been translated into English and edited to eliminate redundancies and to allow for an organized flow, but the tone and substance of the interview remain hers. Whenever helpful, I have included interview questions and editorial comments in brackets.

> I didn't want to come to America but I was forced by circumstances to come. My mother had arranged a marriage for me. I had a passport to come [as a daughter of a U.S. citizen] when I was 16, but I didn't come until I was 23, after the Japanese attacked China.[6] They bombed Shekki and everywhere and there was nowhere to hide so I had to come to America. But my fate was not good. I had never seen my fiancé before, but I knew he was a lot older than me. He said he would give me the choice of marrying him or not after I arrived. My mother wanted me to come so that I could bring the family over later. Because of that, I was afraid to oppose the arranged marriage. I had to be a filial daughter. The situation forced me to sacrifice everything to come to America.

In 1939 I arrived at Angel Island. They told us to put down our luggage [in the storage shed] and then they directed us to the wooden building. We were allowed to bring only a small suitcase of clothes. There must have been over one hundred people. The men had their dormitories and the women had theirs. They assigned us to beds [two-tiered bunk beds] and there were *gwai poh* [foreign devil women] to take care of us. We slept there and had three meals a day. Everyday we got up at about 7:00. They yelled, chow, chow! You know those *gwai poh*. They would wake us up and take us to the dining room for breakfast. Usually a plate of vegetables and a plate of meat catering to the Chinese palate. Nothing good. Sometimes scrambled eggs, sometimes vegetables mixed with meat. Their food was pretty bad, not very tasty. But then most people didn't eat their food. Many had relatives in the city who sent Chinese dishes, barbecued duck and pork, packages of food every day. After we ate, they took us back and locked the doors. That's all. Just like in jail. Followed us out and followed us back, then locked the doors. They treated us like criminals. They were always afraid that we would go over to the men's side and talk to them [and thereby corroborate testimonies] or that we might escape or commit suicide. Where would we escape to? I never saw anyone try suicide, but people did cry for death because they were suffering so.

There was nowhere to go. Just a little hallway that was fenced in for us to sun, exercise, or play ball. No longer than my hallway here [about fifteen feet]. The men's exercise area was larger. There was a long table put there for us to use for writing or sewing. From the windows we could see the boats arrive daily at about 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning. At the end of the day we would watch the inspectors and newly released immigrants leave the island on the same boat. That's all. [How did you pass the time?] Sometimes I read or knitted, made some clothes, or slept. When you got up, it was time to eat again. Day in and day out, eat and sleep. Many people cried. Everyone there cried at least once. [The men gambled and had music, how about the women?] No, no *mah jongg*, no recreation. Once a week they allowed us to walk out to the storage room where our luggage was kept [to retrieve things]. That allowed us to stretch and breathe in some fresh air. We walked around a bit and then returned. [Were you allowed to write letters to your relatives?] Yes, but they examined your letters before mailing them. The same for letters coming in. They opened them to see if there was any coaching information. Any packages or food that were sent to us had to be examined too. Then the *gwai poh* would call our name and deliver the package to you.

[Any other regulations?] Well, when you got sick you were supposed to

tell the *gwai poh*. They would send you to the hospital until you got well. They always gave you laxatives, which tasted awful. After a few days, you came back. We couldn't have any visitors, but there was a Miss Moore [Maurer], a Protestant woman who came once or twice a week. She was pretty old. Sometimes she brought me yarn or fabric. She was very nice to me. I still remember her. At Christmas time she gave us gifts. The staff there were pretty nice to me too because I had been there for such a long time. They allowed me in and out of their office. [Did they ever threaten or punish anyone?] Sometimes when they called you to get up to go eat and you didn't feel well enough, they would force you to. They won't let you stay in bed. Or they would make you go to the hospital. But they never hit anyone. They might scold you but they never punished anyone. Sometimes the girls would scold back and they would get into an argument. But some were very nice to us.[7]

[Did you remember seeing any poems on the walls?] Yes, there were some written [not carved] on the walls. It was like songs people would sing. [Did you write any yourself?] Not on the wall, but I did write poetry to console myself. I would write and cry at the same time. You know, sitting at Angel Island I must have cried a bowlful of tears. It was so pitiful.

[Were there other immigrants who were not Chinese there?] There were a few Japanese and Korean women. They lived in a different room next to ours. We had no contact with them. The Japanese were looked up to. They came and went in a day or two. That's probably because we Chinese didn't have the proper papers.[8]

[Was it comfortable living there?] Of course not! We had a bed to sleep in and the bathrooms were adequate, but it was so noisy with so many people—fifty or sixty women at one time and a few young children besides. Sometimes the people next to you talked or people would cry in the middle of the night so you couldn't sleep. It was very noisy. Sometimes people didn't get along and argued, but because we were in the same fix, we were generally good friends. We shared food and helped each other out even though I couldn't understand the Sze Yup dialect. Often, those who had been there awhile cried when they saw others leave. So you started to cry. It was very sad.[9]

[The men had their Self-Governing Organization that lodged complaints for them, did the women?] No, we didn't. The women did not dare complain [about the food or the treatment]. If you didn't like the food, the only thing you could do is not eat their food and get your own [from relatives in San Francisco]. Or you could buy things at the small store [in the dining room]. You could buy almost anything there—canned fish,

fermented bean cakes, fruit, ice cream, cookies. As a new arrival, you're like a stupid pig, not knowing anything. Whatever they told you to do, you did. There was no recourse for protest.

[What was the interrogation like?] People said that coming to America was like going to heaven, but it was so difficult. You had to memorize all the coaching information—background on your grandparents, your home and neighbors, the distance between places, you know, how many ancestral halls, temples, everything. It was just like in school. You had this vast amount of information to learn. How many brothers and sisters does your father have? What are the names of your uncles? What were their occupations? When did they return to China? Have you ever seen them? When did your grandparents die? Where were they born? Lots of questions and answers going back three generations.

Two or three weeks after my arrival, I was called in for the interrogation. I knew I would be interrogated, but I was still nervous when the time came. There was a typist, an inspector, and an interpreter; three in all. It took three days. We started at 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning. At 11:30 or 12:00 there was a lunch break. Then we went back at 1:00 until 4:00. They asked me about my grandparents, which direction the house faced, which house I lived in, how far from one place to another. It took a long time because they had to interrogate the witnesses too. After they asked me questions, they would ask my father, then my uncles, and then the two witnesses. That's why it took two or three days. [Were the interrogators hard on you?] Sometimes the interpreters were cranky. When I said I wasn't sure or I didn't know, they would tell me to say yes or no. They just treated us like criminals.

After the interrogation, if you failed, they didn't tell you. But when you were allowed to see your father or witnesses, you knew they were going to deport you. You see, if I had passed I won't have had to see the witnesses. I would have been immediately called to land, to gather my things and leave. That's how it usually was. Relatives later told me that they would appeal my case to the higher courts in Washington, D.C. They told me to be patient. My appeal failed the first time and then a second time. They were hoping that when the war finally hit the United States, I would be released. But instead, I was stuck on Angel Island for twenty months. I was there the longest. Most people stayed three weeks or so. Those on appeal left after a few months. But my case was more crooked [complicated] because my paper father had reported twins and it wasn't true. So I wasn't landed.[10]

[Did anything unusual happen while you were there?] Right before I was deported, there was a fire in the middle of the night. We saw flames

and inhaled smoke. Everything was burnt in the women's barracks. It was pretty bad so we had to run over to the hospital to live for awhile. Then they moved us to that immigration building on Washington Street [in San Francisco]. A few weeks later, I was deported to Hong Kong.[11]

[Upon reflection, how do you feel about what happened at Angel Island now?] Before, that was the system. There was nothing you could do about it. That was the American law then, how can you go against it? But this is how I look at it now. If things checked out at the American consul's in Hong Kong, they should let us come. If not, they shouldn't let us come. That would have spared us suffering twenty days aboard ship, seasickness and all, and then imprisonment at Angel Island. In my case, I had to endure twenty months of prison-like confinement. And then to be deported back to Hong Kong, how sad![12]

CARVED IN SILENCE: SECOND INTERVIEW FOR A FILM PRODUCTION

In 1984, when filmmaker Felicia Lowe decided to make *Carved in Silence*, a film about the Chinese immigration experience at Angel Island, I suggested Lee Puey You as a possible subject. Felicia wanted to follow the stories of three immigrants in the format of a docudrama but was having trouble finding ex-detainees who were willing to tell their story on camera and who would come across well on film. Lee agreed to be filmed, and I signed on as a historical consultant to help with the research and interviews. Working with Felicia, I learned that film requires a different approach to interviewing. Although the historical background was important, it was the emotional connection that really mattered.[13]

My job was to sit right below the camera and ask open-ended questions that would evoke memories of Angel Island and encourage Lee Puey You to speak expressively but succinctly into the camera. Short answers in a monotonous tone or long answers that skirted the questions would be deadly in this situation. I learned to be both solicitous and persistent in my line of questioning, to rephrase my questions and ask good follow-up questions in order to steer her in the right direction. Felicia was already familiar with Lee Puey You's story from reading the transcript of our earlier interview with her and from interviewing Lee herself a number of times. She knew which stories she wanted Lee to tell on camera. My part was to draw these stories out of Lee as spontaneously as possible, even though we reshot some of the answers a number of times. Although Lee Puey You's voice would be dubbed over in English, Felicia intended to do an exact translation and stay as close as possible to the tone and wording

of her responses, which, to her credit, she did accomplish in the final edit of the film.

The following excerpts from a series of interviews with Lee Puey You in preparation for the filming of *Carved in Silence* show what we learned by pursuing a different line of questioning. In particular, we hear about her life before and after Angel Island, the dire family conditions that forced her to agree to marry a stranger in America, and the poetry she saw in the bathroom of the women's barracks. Since the building that housed the women at Angel Island burned in the 1940 fire, we had given up hope of ever finding any Chinese poetry by women. Yet, here was Lee Puey You, reciting one of the poems she had written while at Angel Island, proving that not all Chinese immigrant women were illiterate at the time. Moreover, Felicia prodded her to tell us how she felt having to appear naked before a white male physician, something we had failed to ask in our 1975 interview. She also got Lee to analyze how her upbringing and education in China helped her to endure the twenty long months of confinement at Angel Island.

Then came that unforgettable moment on film when Lee Puey You broke down and began to cry while recalling her return voyage to China. It was totally unexpected, and we caught it on film. While it is to Lee's credit as an interviewee that she was willing and able to tell her own story on film as effectively as she did, it still takes a good interviewer and filmmaker to make this possible—to establish the rapport, ask the right questions, and edit the interview so that the significant points are made within a broader historical context. Compared to our cautious approach in interviewing Lee for the book *Island*, Felicia was persistent about exploring Lee's unique background and capturing her emotional response to detention life and deportation on film. The following excerpts from the interview with Lee Puey You have been translated from Chinese into English and edited for an organized flow, but the integrity of her voice has been retained. As before, I have left certain questions in brackets to show what prompted her to answer as she did.

> [What were your reasons for coming?] My mother wanted me to come to America so that later on, I could bring my brothers and sisters over to America. At the time, the Japanese were bombing my village. That was another reason why I fled my country. [How was your family doing then?] When I was very young, my father was a wealthy farmer. A flood destroyed all his land and he lost all his money. It was then that our family changed. My brother had to go to work to support me and my mother. I saw how hard he worked, just one job. It was barely enough. Finally I decided to listen to my mother. I would come to America first and then later

help my brother and the rest of the family to come over. That was what my mother had always wanted. Here, there was a future. In China we were just too poor and there was nothing we could do.

[What were your preparations before you came to America?] My mother had a girlfriend in our village who wanted to introduce me to her cousin for marriage. She wanted me to come to America to marry him so she bought me a false paper.

[Tell me about your trip to the United States.] From my village, I went to Hong Kong. I stayed with relatives in Hong Kong for six months until I got the papers from America to come. Then I got on a big ship and was on it for nineteen days. I thought it would be very easy for me to land in America. Instead, I had to go to Angel Island.

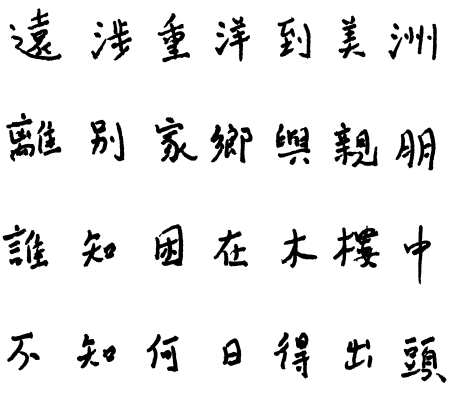
[Could you describe the physical examination?] When the doctor came, I had to take off all my clothes. It was so embarrassing and shameful. I didn't really want to let him examine me, but I had no choice. Back in China, I never had to take off everything, but it was different here in America. I found it very strange.

[Tell me about the interrogation.] The interrogators frightened me. There were two or three Westerners along with one Chinese at the interrogation. Just looking at them made me scared and nervous. I didn't know what to do or how to act around them. They asked me questions that I could not answer, even how many feet our house was from the house next door. I was bewildered and didn't know how to answer them.

[Were the rest of the women scared like you?] Everyone was feeling low. We all suffered emotionally. No one had any energy. We slept all day. So much mental anguish. You know, we cried more than anything else. It was hard and time went by so slowly. When I was in China, I didn't know it would be so hard in America. Everybody said that coming to America was like going to heaven, but at Angel Island they treated the Chinese as if we were criminals, like we were all thieves and robbers. Because I was there so long, all the new arrivals would ask me questions about Angel Island. They all wanted to learn from my experience. We sympathized and tried to help each other out.

[What else gave you the strength to endure such sadness and hardships?] Sometimes I tried to analyze myself, to understand my inner feelings and emotions. Sometimes I wrote poems to express my feelings. That helped to release some of the tension. [Were there many poems written on the walls of the women's barracks?] The bathroom was filled with poems expressing sadness and bitterness. They were about how hard the stay at Angel Island was, how sad and depressed the women were, not

knowing when they would be allowed to leave the island. During one of my more painful moments, I wrote this poem:



From across the Pacific Ocean to America
I left my village and all my loved ones.
Who would have thought I would be im-
prisoned in this wooden barrack?
I do not know when I will ever be set free.

In my darkest moment of sadness, I could only turn to God for help. I just prayed everyday. That was the only way I could bear those hardships. I had no choice but to be strong. I had to take care of myself so that I might survive. I had to fulfill my duty as a filial daughter. That was all![14]

[Tell us how your father influenced your life.] When I was little, my father always told me what to do and how things worked. At fourteen years old, I knew how to lease and how to rent out land. I was considered quite smart. During the poor times, I learned how to dig up plants and roots for cooking. I also knew how to catch fish. I was very capable and helped my mother quite a bit.

[Tell us about your schooling.] I went to school and studied history. We even had a special teacher to teach us the Chinese classics. I have a very good brain so I was able to absorb all the material. This was probably what gave me the extra strength to endure life on Angel Island. It gave me a better understanding of people and of the world. My father always said it was a pity that I was born a girl and not a boy. I had a good business head and was able to help him. I became a housewife after I got married. But I encouraged my husband to buy stocks, a business, and real estate. I had no

interest in just staying home and cleaning house. Even today, my goals in life are more like a man's.

[Why were you on the island so long?] My case had to go through two appeals in Washington, D.C. My mother's girlfriend was determined that I stay in America. She did not care how much money or how long it would take. As long as there was a string of light, she wanted me to hang on. I was the only one to stay on Angel Island for such a long time. Twenty months. Anyone else would have just gone back home to China.[15]

[How did you feel when you found out about your deportation?] My heart felt very heavy. I had no face [was ashamed] to see my family back home. My spirit was broken. During my trip back to China on the boat, my heart hurt so much that I finally had to put some rice, some hot rice, against my chest to ease the pain inside (sobs). The anguish that I had suffered is more than anyone can bear. I can't begin to describe it. Then all of a sudden, I had a dream. My appeal was successful! It was like a message from God. Then my heart was at peace. So that's my story from start to finish. It took me fourteen years to come back to America, fourteen long, long years.[16]

[How was your life when you returned to America the second time?] It was a lot easier than life in China. As long as you are willing to work hard, you can make a better living in America. I consider myself lucky that I did not have to work too hard in America. We had a grocery store, and since there were enough people working in the store, I was not needed. Later on, after my father-in-law passed away and my brother-in-law left, that left only my husband and me to run the store. I would work every day from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. But I only did that for five or six years. Now my life is quite settled. I saved enough money to buy a building so that I can live in one apartment and rent the rest of the units out. I should be able to take care of myself for the rest of my life.

[Tell me how you finally sponsored your family over to America.] My mother had wanted me to come to America, hoping that later on I would somehow bring the rest of the family over. Twenty years later, my mother, my brother, his wife and their four children, my sister and her husband and children rode a ship and came to America. It cost me thousands of dollars, but my mother's hopes have finally been fulfilled! Now all of them are doing well. They all have good jobs and their own homes. And all the children have finished college and are making good money. Everyone is happy and my responsibility to them is finally over.

"IN THE MATTER OF YIM TAI MUEY": THIRD INTERVIEW WITH INS

Sixteen years after the second interview for the film *Carved in Silence*, I came to a different understanding of Lee Puey You's immigration experience and life in America. It had not been as "easy" as she had said. By then, Lee had passed away, and I turned to her daughters, Daisy and Debbie Gin, for help in clarifying some discrepancies in her interviews. Based on the immigration files that Daisy and Debbie found at the National Archives, we learned that in 1955 someone blew the whistle and reported her illegal entry to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). A warrant for her arrest was issued on the grounds that the immigration visa she had used to enter the country in 1947 had been procured by fraud. She was ordered to appear before the INS to show cause as to why she should not be deported. The stakes were just as high as they had been for her at Angel Island in 1939, but this time she had the benefit of an attorney to represent her interest, as well as the support of her second husband, Fred Gin, whom she had married in 1953. She was also apparently prepared to tell the whole story. According to the transcript, part way through the interrogation and at the prompting of her attorney, she said through the interpreter, "I wish to volunteer the whole facts in the case." Then she proceeded to tell the following story:[17]

> I was born in Cr 5-5-3. My name was Lee Puey You at birth. When I was about 13 years old my father died and he did not leave us anything and my family was very poor. It was during the war and my family was having a hard time to make a living. One day a cousin of Woo Tong talked to my mother and told her that he has a cousin in the United States whose wife died recently and that he would like to remarry again and asked my mother whether she was willing to consent to having her daughter marry his cousin in the United States. Later Woo Tong's cousin tell my mother to have a photograph of me to send it to Woo Tong to see whether he liked me or not. Some time later Woo Tong's cousin came and told me that I was to go to the United States under the name of Ngin Ah Oy as a daughter of a son of a native—I was known as Yim Tai Muey at that time—and that after I came to the United States I was to marry Woo Tong as his wife, and I came to the United States in 1939. When I arrived here in San Francisco, I was detained at Angel Island for almost two years. During all of that time I had a very hard time and I was very sad, and every time that someone was released from there I felt sick all over again. I did not know what was happening to my case. I even attempted suicide. Then later I was deported back to Hong Kong. On my way back to Hong Kong I wanted

to commit suicide again, but I was thinking about my mother, of the hard times we had together. When I arrived back in Hong Kong, I sold rice on the street in Hong Kong. I was having a very hard time because it was during the war at that time. My mother told me that we have used some of Woo Tong's money and no matter how hard a time I am having I must not get married. She already promised my marriage to Woo Tong. She said that I should wait until after the war, when she could correspond with Woo Tong again and that he will make arrangements for me to go to the United States again. After the war, in about 1947, Woo Tong came to Hong Kong and he came to our house and talked to my mother. Later then, we invited some friends for dinner; then my mother told me it was considered as my marriage ceremony with Woo Tong. Then Woo Tong told me of his plan to bring me to the United States. He said I was to get a marriage certificate with Sai Chan and said I was to come to the United States as Sai Chan's wife and said he would accompany me to the United States. After Sai Chan and I obtained our marriage certificate from the American Consular Office in Hong Kong, he told me that I must go to a husband and wife relationship with him before he could bring me to the United States. I objected to that, but he forced me into that, so I lived with him as man and wife in Hong Kong. Sai Chan and I came to the United States together in 1947. After we arrived in the United States, he took me to Woo Tong's place at 1141 Stockton Street and he left me there. When I get there I learned Woo Tong's wife was still living and that I was not actually to be Woo Tong's wife, but his concubine. I objected to it, but there was nothing I could do because I was now here in the United States. I did not know of anyone to go to for aid, so I stayed with him. During all those times I was living there, I was treated very badly by his wife. She treated me as a slave girl. I had to do all kinds of work in the house, take care of her, and I also had to take care of one of Woo Tong's buildings. On January 8, 1949, I gave birth to a daughter fathered by Woo Tong. While I was in the Stanford Hospital during my maternity period, Woo Tong made all the arrangements for me. He filled out the birth certificate for my daughter, and he filled out the father's name as Sai Chan. Woo Tong died August 18, 1950, in San Francisco. After he died, his wife forced me to continue to work for her. When Woo Tong died, he did not leave money or anything for my daughter and myself. I met Fred Gin in about 1953 and learned his wife had passed away several years before. I found he was a person of good character. I went with him about six months before we got married. I went to Reno and obtained a divorce decree from Sai Chan to clear the record on January 16, 1953. Fred Gin had two sons by his first wife in the

United States and after we were married, I bore him a daughter on February 4, 1955.[18]

Then followed a series of humiliating questions regarding her moral character, specifically her sexual relationships with Sai Chan and Woo Tong:

Q: During the few days you lived with Woo Tong after that dinner [in Hong Kong], did you have sexual intercourse with him?
Q: [After you were admitted to the United States and started living with Woo Tong] did you immediately have sexual intercourse with Woo Tong?
Q: When did you last have sexual intercourse with Woo Tong?
Q: After you obtained a marriage certificate with Sai Chan, did you voluntarily submit to relationships with him?

Lee Puey You admitted to no wrongdoing and insisted that she was just following her mother's orders, that she had agreed to marry Woo Tong believing he was a widower, and that Sai Chan had forced her to have sex with him after their wedding. In the cross-examination by her attorney, Lee emphasized her newfound happiness at being married to Fred Gin:

Q: What would happen if you were separated from Fred and the rest of your family?
A: I would have a hard time, because I have no one else to go to if I should be separated from my family.
Q: Would Fred go with you in the event you should be deported?
A: I will not allow him to go with me even if willing, because I don't want him to sacrifice his life for me.
Q: Would you take your blood daughters Eva and Daisy if you were separated from Fred?
A: No. I will leave them in the United States. Even if they have to beg or starve in the United States, I would leave them because the living conditions here in the United States are better.[19]

When asked by the INS officer if she had anything further to add before the hearing came to a close, she said:

I just wish to say that you give me a chance so that I can remain in the United States to be with my family. I found happiness after I married Fred Gin. Prior to that time the wrongdoing was not due to my fault. I was just obeying my mother, which she make all the arrangements with Woo Tong that I apply for a marriage certificate as the wife of Sai Chan to come to the United States.

Wedding picture of Lee Puey You and Fred Gin in 1953. Published courtesy of Debbie Gin.

The INS officer was evidently not convinced or moved by her testimony and ordered her deported on grounds that her immigration visa had been procured by fraud and that "she [had] lived in an adulterous relationship with Woo Tong" while still married to Sai Chan. Lee Puey You did not give up. She hired another attorney to appeal the decision on her behalf. First, the attorney argued that she was "not innately a bad person of criminal tendencies . . . but a mere pawn—indeed a slave—of men who deserve severe condemnation." Next, he pointed out that because her marriage to Sai Chan, a citizen veteran, was consummated and deemed valid, she had immigrated legitimately as a war bride. Evidently persuaded by the attorney's arguments, the Board of Immigration Appeals sustained Lee Puey You's appeal and terminated the deportation proceedings on March 25, 1956. She became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1959, which paved the way for her to send for her family from China.

Lee Puey You's full story sheds light not only on the complexities and ordeal of immigration for Chinese women at Angel Island, but also on how we can best reclaim that past through oral history. Conceptions of race, class, and gender all played a part in determining who immigrated and their treatment upon arrival. Because of poverty and war conditions at home, and out of filial duty, Lee sacrificed her own happiness in agreeing to marry a man who was thirty years her senior in order to immigrate to the United States. In the process, class and gender inequities placed her in a vulnerable position, to be sexually exploited by men such as Woo Tong and Sai Chan. Then, because of race, class, and gender biases in the exclusionary laws, Lee could come to the United States only by posing as a dependent member of the exempt classes. As such, she was subjected to a double test. In claiming her right to land as the daughter of a U.S. citizen, she had to reconfirm her alleged father's exempt status as well as prove that their relationship actually existed. Later, when she was accused of fraudulent entry as a war bride and threatened with deportation, she had to prove the legitimacy of her marriage to a citizen veteran as well as her moral character by answering humiliating questions about her sexual life. In these ways, race, class, and gender dynamics made the immigration process more difficult for Chinese women like Lee Puey You than for any other group of immigrants during the exclusion period.

In interviewing Lee Puey You, it was important that Him Mark Lai and I were Chinese-speaking, culturally sensitive, and well informed about Chinese American history. For these reasons, we were able to establish rapport with her and encourage her to talk freely about her twenty-month ordeal at Angel Island. But being novice oral historians and overly polite at the time, we missed out on the opportunity to learn the full impact of exclusion on her life and how

she was able to overcome racial and gender oppression. Working with Felicia Lowe on the film *Carved in Silence* made me realize how important it is to be persistent and analytical in our line of questioning. What influential forces shaped her life and helped her to cope with detention at Angel Island?

Even after knowing this, we did not get the full tragic story. It had not occurred to any of us to question the validity of her story, to read between the lines, to compare the interview with her testimony in the records of the National Archives, or even to ask her daughters what they knew. What made her hide the truth from us? Would she have told us the whole story if we had probed further or showed her the immigration record? Although aware of the pain that full recall might have caused her, I believe that she would have told us more if we had only persisted. In not doing our job well as critical oral historians, we missed the opportunity to better understand her life as well as to vindicate the wrongs committed against her.

Nevertheless, one thing is for certain: Lee Puey You was not a passive victim but an active agent in the making of her own history. She chose to talk to us and then selectively to tell us what she did. That showed good judgment and self-control. After three appeals and deportation to Hong Kong, she ultimately succeeded in her goal of landing in America and sending for her family. That took patience and tenacity. Even though both Sai Chan and Woo Tong betrayed her, she kept her word and went through with the marriages. That showed strength of character. And when threatened with deportation again, she persisted in fighting to the extent of telling and reliving the sordid details of her horrendous past. That required courage and forbearance on her part.[20]

In finally being able to hear her full story, I believe we come to a better understanding of and appreciation for the struggles and triumphs of our foremothers. Lee Puey You's story is an important part of the larger American story, indeed a challenge to the master narrative of the immigration saga, and a reminder that reclaiming our past as women requires a special approach to doing oral history.[21]

The following is an unedited translation of a Chinese letter that Lee Puey You wrote to her alleged father while at Angel Island. It was found in the women's barracks soon after the Board of Special Inquiry denied her admission into the United States on May 6, 1939. When confronted with this piece of evidence in a gut-wrenching interview before the Board, Lee repeatedly denied that she had written it and refused to provide a sampling of her handwriting for verification. But two hours later, she relented, asked to see the head inspector, and admitted to writing it. According to the Board's report, "this incident furnishes convincing proof that the applicant will lie deliberately and repeatedly in her

testimony in this matter whenever she considers it to be to her advantage to do so." Evidently, the Board disregarded the positive aspects of Lee Puey You's character as revealed in the letter and chose instead to focus only on the letter as further evidence that she should be denied admission:

> Yesterday I received a box of canned food and a letter, which I have noted. Some days ago I had received some foodstuff twice and a Chinese-American calendar which is very useful and which I have hung on the wall.
>
> The foodstuff you sent me is very good, but I would ask you not to spend so much to buy food to send me, because I cannot eat so much. Send me some calico, if you have it.
>
> The hotel expenses must be very great, and then you have to appeal the case to Washington. That means money and anxiety on your part. I do not mind to prolong my stay here in order to get landed. I do not know whether you have understood the testimony in this case or not. If you do not know it all, you can write the word "mei" on the edge or in the bottom of a box of food you might send me, and when I see it I will understand. Write that word plainly, so that I will send it to you by some one who will be landed later. I want to tell you the answers I gave to the questions, so that you may know them and advise me concerning my answers. If you have understood it, I do not wish to talk about it now. When some one goes to the city, I will send it to you by him (or her).
>
> Every time you sent me something, the officer tore away the name on the side and kept it until the next day. When you send me things, you can write "sent by Ngim Lin," but that's not important. I am glad to know you have sent mother a letter and some money. Your last letter said that the case had been appealed to Washington, and that costs you money and gives you anxiety. Please get me a beginner's book to learn how to write English, so that I may make use of my time here.
>
> To my father Ngim Lin, C/O maternal uncle Woo Tong.
> (NOTE: The Chinese paper from which the above translation is made is a draft of a letter, rather poorly written, but the translation is substantially and almost literally correct. Interp. H. K. Tang, 5-19-39).

NOTES

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Puey You. My thanks to Daisy and Debbie Gin for sharing their mother's story and immigration file with me; to Michael Frush for his assistance at the National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region (San Francisco); and to Ruthanne Lum McCunn for her careful reading of an earlier draft of this essay.

1. The exclusion period began with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred the further immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States, and ended with the repeal of the act in 1943. Between 1910 and 1940, during the time that the Angel Island Immigration Station was in operation, Chinese immigrants were singled out for long detention and subjected to physical examinations and grueling interrogations in order to prove their legal right to enter the country. Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (San Francisco: HOC DOI Project, Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1980; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991).

2. Judy Yung, "'A Bowlful of Tears': Chinese Women Immigrants on Angel Island," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2:2 (1977): 52–55. The National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region (San Francisco) holds thousands of immigration case files relating to the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act at Angel Island that can be made available to family members and researchers. For details, see Waverly Lowell, "Chinese Immigration and Chinese in the United States: Records in the Regional Archives of the National Archives and Records Administration," National Archives and Records Administration, Reference Information Paper 99 (1996).

3. At my suggestion, Daisy and Debbie Gin looked up their mother's immigration records at the National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region in San Bruno, California, and were able to uncover three separate files: documents pertaining to her interrogation at Angel Island in 1939 (Ngim Ah Oy, Folder 39071/12-9, Chinese Departure Case Files, San Francisco District Office, Immigration and Naturalization Service, record group 85); the legal briefs of three separate appeals to higher courts not to deport her ("In the Matter of Ngim Ah Oy on Habeas Corpus," folder 23099R, Admiralty Files, San Francisco District Office, Immigration and Naturalization Service, record group 85); and documents pertaining to her deportation hearing in 1955 ("In the Matter of Yim Tai Muey," folder A6824153, Alien Registration Files, San Francisco District Office, Immigration and Naturalization Service, record group 85). The staff at the National Archives could not locate the immigration file of her entry as a war bride in 1947.

4. Chinese wanting to immigrate to the United States during the exclusion period found ways to circumvent the Chinese Exclusion Act by posing as members of the exempt classes—merchants, teachers, students, officials, tourists, and those who claimed derivative U.S. citizenship. Relatives or professionals in the field prepared coaching books for prospective immigrants, giving questions and answers about one's background that immigration officials might ask. For a detailed description of a coaching

book, see Judy Yung, *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 32–56.

5. The War Brides Act of 1945 was amended in 1947 to allow Chinese American veterans to bring their wives to the United States.

6. In 1937, after Japan's vicious attack on China, war was formally declared between the two countries. Shekki (Shiqi) is the county seat of Chungshan (Zhongshan) District in Guangdong Province. Her fiancé was thirty years her senior.

7. Deaconess Katharine Maurer (1881–1962) was appointed by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1912 to administer to the needs of immigrants at Angel Island. She was known as the Angel of Angel Island.

8. Because of the diplomatic influence of the Japanese government, and because the Japanese generally had passports and papers to verify their identities, they faced few delays at Angel Island.

9. Most of the women were from the Sze Yup districts of Guangdong Province (Sunwui, Toishan, Hoiping, and Yanping), while Lee Puey You was from Chungshan District, where the Lung Do dialect was spoken.

10. The final report in Lee Puey You's immigration file cited numerous discrepancies in her own testimonies about her birth date and in her "paper father's" testimony about his family background and the exact birth dates and different names given to his twin children (Lee Puey You was supposedly the older twin child).

11. Lee Puey You is probably referring to the immigration building at 630 Sansome Street near Washington Street, where she was detained in 1947 on her second attempt to enter the United States. After the fire in 1940, Chinese detainees were temporarily housed at 801 Silver Avenue in San Francisco.

12. Indeed, beginning in the 1950s, decisions on one's eligibility for admission into the United States were made at the port of departure.

13. Felicia Lowe, *Carved in Silence* (San Francisco: Felicia Lowe Productions, distributed by Cross Currents Media, 1987).

14. According to Daisy Gin, her mother never converted to Christianity but was always open to all belief systems.

15. According to Lee Puey You's immigration file, her lawyer actually filed three appeals on her behalf—first to the U.S. District Court, then to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, and finally to the U.S. Supreme Court.

16. It took Lee Puey You fourteen years to come to America, counting from 1932, when she was betrothed and first issued a visa, to 1947, when she was finally admitted into the United States as a war bride.

17. Yim Tai Muey is the name that Lee Puey You used to enter the United States as a war bride in 1947. Lee Puey You gave her testimony in Chinese. Through an interpreter, the transcript was rendered in English. I have intentionally quoted the transcript as is and not corrected any of the grammatical errors in it.

18. "Cr" refers to the Chinese Republic, which was established in 1912. Lee Puey You was born in the fifth year, fifth month, and third day of the Chinese Republic, or June 3, 1916, according to the Western calendar. Sai Chan (the pseudonym I chose to use in compliance with INS regulations) is a U.S. citizen and World War II veteran.

19. At the time of the INS interview, Lee Puey You's youngest daughter, Debbie Gin, had not yet been born.

20. Similarly, according to her daughter Daisy Gin, Lee Puey You led a courageous and a very "in character" struggle with cancer before she died in 1996: "She underwent a mastectomy in 1985 and would insist on taking the bus to her chemotherapy sessions on her own, only to take a taxi afterwards to play *mah jongg* in some Chinatown alley! She then underwent a very major operation for pancreatic cancer in 1990, where most of her digestive system was removed. She was given a prognosis of only six months to a year, even with repeated chemotherapy. She surprised and was marveled by her surgeon and physicians when she passed the five-year mark. She waved off medical advice about diet and diabetes-control measures and said that she knew how to take care of her own body" (e-mail communication to author on September 10, 2000).

21. See Sherna Gluck, "What's So Special about Women? Women's Oral History," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2:2 (1977): 3–17; and Judy Yung, "Giving Voice to Chinese American Women," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19:3 (1998): 130–56.