"Songs of Gold Mountain"

At Angel Island, Chinese immigrants had to submit to a battery of physical examinations and harsh interrogations. Detainees at the Wooden Barracks were not allowed to go beyond the compound or to meet any outside visitors. It was not uncommon to be detained in the Wooden Barracks for several weeks, even over a year, while awaiting process. The facilities were minimal, without any consideration for privacy. Suicides were not unknown.

Many of the Chinese at the Angel Island Wooden Barracks wrote poems expressing their agony, frustration, anger, and despair. They would scribble the lines all over tile walls of the barracks where they slept. In the 1930s, two detainees copied the scribbles and brought them to San Francisco.

Poem 1:
As soon as it is announced
the ship has reached America:
I burst out cheering,
I have found precious pearls.
How can I bear the detention upon arrival,
Doctors and immigration officials refusing
to let me go?
All the abuse -
I can't describe it with a pen.
I'm held captive in a wooden barrack, like King Wen In Youli:
No end to the misery and sadness in my heart.

Poem 4:
At home I was in poverty,
constantly worried about firewood and rice.
I borrowed money
to come to Gold Mountain.
Immigration officers cross-examined me:
no way could I get through.
Deported to this island,
like a convicted criminal.
Here -
Mournful sighs fill the gloomy room.
A nation weak; her people often humiliated
Like animals, tortured and destroyed at others' whim.

Poem 6
The wooden cell is like a steel barrel
Firmly shut, not even a breeze can filter through.
Over a hundred cruel laws, hard to list them all;
Ten thousand grievances, all from the tortures of day and night.
Worry, and more worry
How can I sleep in peace or eat at ease?
There isn't cangue, but the hidden punishment is just as weighty.
Tears soak my clothes; frustration fills my bosom.