



“Ocean People”: Maritime (Im)Mobilities in the Chinese American Imaginary

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“Ocean people are different from land people,” claims the narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*. The narrator continues by suggesting that the ocean, personified and irresistible, represents an important aspect in the lives of those dwelling on its shores:

The ocean never stops saying and asking into ears, which don’t sleep like eyes. Those who live by the sea examine the driftwood and glass balls that float from foreign ships. They let scores of invisible imps loose out of found bottles. In a scoop of salt water, they revive the dead blobs that have been beached in storms and tides: fins, whiskers, and gills unfold; mouths, eyes, and colors bloom and spread. Sometimes ocean people are given to understand the newness and oldness of the world; then all morning they try to keep that boundless joy like a little sun inside their chests. The ocean also makes its people know immensity. They wonder what continents contain the ocean on its other side, what people live there. ([1980] 1989, 90)

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In this passage, those who live near the ocean are influenced by the material qualities of the oceanic space: the sounds, the natural movement of the sea, the items washed ashore, and the ocean's vastness ultimately shape the individuals' identities as "ocean people." Simultaneously, the narrator's description of the ocean echoes many of the prevalent features commonly associated with the sea: It is described as constantly changing and used as a familiar metaphor for fluidity, open-mindedness, curiosity, flexibility, infinity, and, as Kingston's narrator ultimately points out, mobility (91).

Scholars from various disciplines explain that mobility is often regarded as a distinctive if not positive factor in our modern, globalized world. In his study *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, geographer Tim Cresswell claims that "mobility bears a number of meanings that circulate widely in the modern Western world. Mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity, and as modernity, sit side by side with mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance" (2006, 1–2). Caren Kaplan has used the expression "romantic reading of mobility" to describe this approach in scholarship (qtd. in Sheller and Urry 2006, 211). In recent years, scholars studying mobility and migration have become increasingly aware of the pitfalls of these romanticized perspectives in their respective fields. Sociologist Mimi Sheller therefore advocates that "[c]ritical mobilities research instead interrogates who and what is demobilized and remobilized across many different scales, and in what situations mobility or immobility might be desired options, coerced, or paradoxically interconnected" (2011, 2). In a (post)colonial, globalized world, mobility and migration must also be understood in terms of power relations and material conditions—and cannot be studied without considering the countless absences of and restrictions on mobility.¹

The ocean, itself continuously in flux and an actual route for migration, is often "used to signal a world of mobilities, betweenness, instabilities, and becomings" and is regarded as "a signifier for a world of shifting, fragmented identities, mobilities and connections" in oceanic studies scholarship (Steinberg 2013, 156, 158; see also Blum 2010). This metaphorical reading of the ocean might not only risk neglecting the

¹ See also Noel B. Salazar's discussion of mobility in the field of anthropology and his criticism of the "general celebration and romanticization" of movement (2014, 59), as well as Anne-Marie Fortier's call for "a reconsideration of the fluidity, accessibility and desirability of the assumed mobile world, as well as the conditions under which people are 'mobile' (or not)" (qtd. in Salazar 2014, 65).

negative aspects of mobility but often also ignore the material circumstances of the ocean and oceanic mobility. Criticizing this mono-dimensional approach, Hester Blum calls for "a practice of oceanic studies that is attentive to the material conditions and praxis of the maritime world, one that draws from the epistemological structures provided by the lives and writings of those for whom the sea was simultaneously workplace, home, passage, penitentiary and promise" (Blum 2010, 670).

Understanding the ocean in both metaphorical and material terms as Kingston's use of "ocean people" ultimately suggests, this article examines the ambiguous relationships between time and space, mobility and immobility, sea and land and the way they are represented in Chinese American literature. I focus on two oceanic tropes, the ship voyage and the island, in texts that represent the effects of Chinese exclusion laws on Chinese (American) maritime (im)mobilities. First, I explore the accounts of ship voyages across the ocean in two memoir-like family narratives, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) and Pam Chun's *The Money Dragon* (2002). Both texts engage with the conditions that the authors' families faced on board the ships that brought them to the continental United States and the territory of Hawai'i respectively. Second, my analysis will focus on the description of Ellis Island and, especially, Angel Island, the main immigration centers for Chinese migrants arriving in the United States. Here, I will focus on the early twentieth-century poetry found on the walls of the immigration centers as well as Genny Lim's play *Paper Angels* (1978) that was inspired by Angel Island poetry, and which explores the Chinese experience on the island in more depth.² As these texts depict encounters on ships and islands, the representations of maritime (im)mobilities and the significant though, at times, ambiguous role of the ocean define the Chinese American experience during the era of Chinese exclusion.

² My essay follows the traditional itinerary of Chinese migrants: The first part of my analysis focuses on depictions of the ship voyage before I examine the representations of their island experiences in the second part of this essay. The two more recent texts by Maxine Hong Kingston and Pam Chun pay more attention to the role of the sea passage in the Chinese American experience and suggest that the reach of the Chinese exclusion laws and the anti-Chinese policies extended far beyond US national territory and was indeed transoceanic in scope. This also reflects the transnational perspective of these two memoir-like family narratives that explore the authors' family histories as intricately linked with the US past but not necessarily bound by US-American national borders.

CROSSING OCEANS: CHINESE (AMERICAN) MOBILITY IN THE PACIFIC AND BEYOND

In US-American culture, mobility on both the individual and national level is highly valued and closely interconnected. Its role remains pertinent to any understanding of US-American culture: “Throughout U.S.-American cultural history, geographical and social mobility—oftentimes seen as interdependent—have been of major significance for the narratives of nation-building and American subject formation” (Paul, Ganser, and Gerund 2012, 12; see also Campbell 2001, 285). Transatlantic crossings were the starting point for the British colonial project, and transatlantic migration and exchange have defined the American Republic from its very beginnings. However, this focus often neglects the role of transpacific mobility and migration as scholars of transpacific studies have shown (e.g., Nguyen and Hoskins 2014). Not only did American interests extend across the Pacific, but Asians and Pacific Islanders navigated and shaped the Pacific long before the advent of European and later American imperial forces (see McKeown 2014). From the sixteenth century onward, the Chinese were particularly active in transpacific endeavors: People of Chinese descent were active agents in commerce; they were key players in the history of Spanish Manila (today’s Philippines) and in cities in Southeast Asia (Reid 2008, xxi–xxiv). In the nineteenth century, the free cities of Singapore and Hong Kong as well as Malaysia, Indonesia, but also Peru were among the destinations of an increasing number of Chinese migrants (xxv). Chinese migrants cultivated sugar in Hawai’i (Nordyke and Lee 1989, 197) and became an important source of labor in the United States and elsewhere in the Americas, including the Caribbean islands. While many Chinese came to the United States to find work building the transcontinental railroad, others participated in the California Gold Rush. The often dire situation in their homeland was a further incentive for many Chinese to seek opportunities abroad.³

³For an overview of the history of the Chinese in the Pacific see Anthony Reid’s edited volume *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific* (2008), particularly Reid’s introduction and Adam McKeown’s essay “Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842–1949” in the same volume. McKeown’s work on *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900–1936* (2001) and Elizabeth Sinn’s *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* (2013) present more focused accounts of the history of the Chinese role in the Pacific. McKeown’s essay also elaborates on the role of push factors such as “the midcentury rebellions and worsening land-man ratios” as well economic circumstances, at times specific to certain regions in China (2008, 8–10). While many of the migrants from China had their origins in the region of Canton, this article considers the representation of the experiences of Cantonese immigrants as part of the larger Chinese American imaginary.

While many literary representations and scholarly analyses are concerned with these immigrants’ integration in US society as well as their contribution to the development of the US nation-state, there has been a recent surge of interest in the role of Chinese migrants in transnational histories. In particular, the field of transpacific studies reflects and advocates this new perspective (e.g., Ngyuen and Hoskins 2014; Kurashige 2017; Wang and Cho 2017). At the same time, a growing body of scholarly literature in Asian American studies turns toward the Atlantic and focuses on the Caribbean histories of Chinese migrants.⁴ Yet, while the Pacific and Atlantic crossings of Chinese migrants inform these works, Asian American studies has shown little interest in the role of the ocean—in its material and metaphorical qualities—in Chinese American texts and, in general, few scholars have focused on what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls “the *aquatic* aspects of transoceanic diaspora” (2007, 60). Examining Atlantic and Pacific experiences alongside each other, this essay highlights the overall significance of the ocean—and the maritime tropes of ships and islands—in Chinese American literature.⁵

SHIP VOYAGES

The ship has been of central significance in (trans)Atlantic studies, especially in relation to and as a symbol of the trauma experienced by enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade. Paul Gilroy identified the chronotope of the slave ship as the “central organizing symbol” of the Black Atlantic (1993, 4). The ship voyage, specifically in its relation to time and space, also plays an important role in Chinese American history and culture.⁶ The Chinese participated not only in transpacific commerce, but they also crossed the Pacific (and the Atlantic) as

⁴For research on the Chinese in the Caribbean, see, among others, Walton Look Lai and Tan Chee-Beng’s *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean* (2010) or Lisa Yun’s *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (2008).

⁵Given the fact that most Chinese migrants had to cross the Pacific to reach their destination, most of the representations analyzed here reflect this geographic precondition and mainly relate transpacific experiences. Yet, it remains indicative of the impact of Chinese exclusion that these geographic differences play little role in their effect on the representation of maritime (im)mobilities.

⁶For more on the chronotope of the slave ship, especially with regard to time and space, see DeLoughrey’s discussion of the role of the slave ship in the first chapter “Middle Passages: Modernity and Creolization” of *Routes and Roots* (2007) as well as Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016).

laborers and coolies (see McKeown 2014, 151).⁷ The popular designation “FOB” or “fresh off the boat” for first-generation Chinese Americans might suggest that the maritime voyage is still regarded as the imaginary starting point of the Chinese American experience for Chinese immigrants.⁸ The analysis of these voyages further reveals the traumatizing effects caused by exclusion laws and practices and sheds light on how the subsequent restriction of maritime mobility affects the characterization of the ocean in the Chinese American imaginary.

In *China Men*, what John Eperjesi has described as the “romanticized, ahistorical vision of ‘ocean people’” in his analysis of Kingston’s text, is sharply contradicted by the actual material conditions the protagonists face during transpacific migration (2005, 145). Eperjesi regards the notion of “ocean people” as a vision that provides “momentary relief” from the actual situation, both on and off board, that the great-grandfather, Bak Goong, has to endure (146).⁹ The father’s presumed transoceanic crossing, depicted early in *China Men*, is probably the best-known representation of a ship voyage in Chinese American literature and, indeed, casts the oceanic experience in a very different light. When she chronicles the lives of her male relatives, Kingston, who admits that she does not know the details of her father BaBa’s life, blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction and relates multiple versions of his immigrant tale. The first version exemplifies a “legal trip from Cuba to New York” ([1980] 1989, 48). Shortly afterwards, the narrator, uncertain of the actual circumstances, proposes an

⁷ Although Judith Misrahi-Barak has pointed out that Patricia Powell, a writer of Jamaican descent, describes the sea voyage of Chinese migrants to the Caribbean in terms that recall the transatlantic slave trade (see Misrahi-Barak 2012), I do not want to insinuate that depictions of ship voyages in Chinese American representations of transpacific mobility and transnational migration can be compared to the repercussions of the Middle Passage in the Atlantic—in particular with respect to the traumatic impact on Black collective memory.

⁸ The term is mostly employed to distinguish between American-born Chinese (‘ABCs’) and new immigrants. It is usually understood as a derogatory term, and has been used extensively to designate newly arrived immigrants in relation to migration from Asia after 1965, and to describe styles of speaking and behaving (see Hall-Lew 2014, 62 and Shalini Shankar 2008, 270). Eddie Huang’s 2013 memoir *Fresh off the Boat* and the eponymous TV series (2015–2020) based on the memoir reflect and reinforce the currency of this term.

⁹ Eperjesi further suggests that Kingston’s *China Men* presents the “myth of a founding ocean people, with [a] celebratory shading of diaspora” which is, however, contrasted and complicated by the characters’ experiences of separation, exploitation, and racialization (2005, 147; 150–152).

alternative, much more disturbing narrative: "I think this is the journey you don't tell me: The father's friends nailed him inside a crate with no conspicuous air holes. Light leaked through the slats that he himself had fitted together, and the bright streaks jumped and winked as the friends hammered the lid shut above his head" (49). While the time frame and the exact political details are not described in the chapter "The Father from China," this voyage clearly stands in contrast to the legal journey depicted in the preceding passage, and alludes to the restraints on Chinese immigration to the United States under the Chinese exclusion laws. What follows in the account of BaBa's sea passage describes not only these repercussions but also challenges widespread assumptions of the ocean as promising freedom, mobility, and non-territoriality, thereby complicating and questioning the narrator's positive description of the ocean and "ocean people."

Indeed, the ocean, as experienced while enclosed in a box aboard a ship, is portrayed in an ambivalent light; the sea journey becomes a deeply traumatic event: "[T]he father's body is converted into a transportable body-box of limbs arranged to fit the parameters of the hiding space" (Gsoels-Lorensen 2010, 106), a fragmentation, as Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen observes, that does not end with the journey but is echoed later in the father's life (107; 109): anxious and under pressure, the father, albeit safe in his home, "checked his limbs" in what could be understood as a moment of depersonalization (Kingston [1980] 1989, 251). The disruption of both his body image and his perception of linear time dominates the narrative of the sea journey: "Because of fear, he did not eat nor did he feel hungry. His bowels felt loose and bladder full, but he squeezed shut ass and sphincter against using the chamber pot. He slept and woke and slept again and time seemed long and forever" (50). As he loses his sense of time, "[v]arious futures ran through his mind" (49), and his temporal distress becomes closely connected to spatial disorientation:

Then he felt himself being lifted as in a palanquin and carried to a darker place. Nothing happened for hours so that he began to lose his bearings—whether or not he was in a deep part of the ship where horns and anchor chains could not be heard, whether or not there had already been a pulling away from land, a plunging into the ocean and this was steady speed. (49)

He does not know where he is on board the ship nor does he have an idea where the ship is located geographically. The most threatening aspect of his disorientation is the actual possibility that he might have fallen overboard: “He wanted to look out and see if his box had dropped overboard and was floating atop water, a transparency that ought not to be able to bear weight; he could have been immersed and this wooden air bubble hanging at a middle depth, or falling through the whale waters” (50). Remembering the tale of an underwater city in the Yellow River, BaBa further considers the dangers lurking in the water as he wonders “what larger oceanic unknown—tortoises twenty feet across, open-mouthed fish like the marine monster that swallowed the sutras—swam alongside or beneath him. What eels, sharks, jellies, rays glided a board’s-width away?” (50). The description of the sea and life under water, as “whale waters,” a habitat populated by and intended for unfamiliar, beast-like creatures rather than humans, suggests that the ocean constitutes a possibly life-threatening environment, essentially hostile to humans in its material characteristics.

Yet, these tales also become a source of hope when BaBa enters the realm of the mythical, which suggests agency on the part of the creatures inhabiting rivers and oceans and a larger connection between humans and non-humans in and through the element of water: “He must not be afraid; it was sea turtles and water lizards that had formed a bridge for King Mu of Chou” (50). Indeed, the continuous movements of the ocean and the sounds of the waves become a source of imagination for the confined father: “Rocking and dozing, he felt the ocean’s variety—the peaked waves that must have looked like the pines; the rolling waves, round like shrubs, the occasional icy mountain; and for stretches, lulling grasslands” (50). When he hears voices, they “must have been the sounds of the ocean given sense by his memory.” The ocean becomes personified, “invent[ing] words too” (51). BaBa “hear[s] a new language, which might have been English, the water’s many tongues speaking and speaking. Though he could not make out words, the whispers sounded personal, intimate, talking him over, sometimes disapproving, sometimes in praise of his bravery” (51). The mythical and metaphorical qualities of the “open sea” (49), described as a source of hope for the father, are reflected in the narrator’s vision of “ocean people” some chapters later; yet, they remain in stark contrast to the actual material conditions of transoceanic mobility that are produced by the effects of Chinese exclusion and the existential dangers

inherent in sea travel that command the need for hope in the first place.¹⁰ In this context, *China Men*'s overall style and structure, negotiating oral and written modes, storytelling and historiography, might also be worthy of consideration. On the one hand, the chapter on BaBa's journey to the United States offers parallel versions of the story and thus manifests a fluidity that reflects the ocean, itself described as a storyteller; on the other hand, the chapter entitled "The Laws," inserted right in the middle of *China Men*, suggests that the historiographical, legal account inscribes the journey's material effects in the lives of those crossing the ocean.¹¹

This tension between the imagined qualities of the ocean and the actual consequences of legal exclusion, but also of military conflict, heightened by the dangers of transoceanic migration also opens the first chapter of Pam Chun's *The Money Dragon*. Chronicling the family saga of Ah Leong, the author's great-grandfather and a Chinese Hawaiian businessman also known as the Money Dragon, the book's first chapter adopts the narrative perspective of Ah Leong's daughter-in-law Phoenix, who crosses the Pacific with her husband Tat-Tung and their daughter Fung-Tai in 1918 to join Ah Leong's family in Hawai'i. When Phoenix's father returns from Singapore, her desire for stories of mobility and adventure sets the tone of the first part of the book: "I wanted stories—of sword-wielding pirates roving the South China Straits, of emperors bewitched by tiger demons, of ghosts rising from graves on moonlit nights" (Chun 2002, 3). Her retrospective assessment some lines later foreshadows the traumatizing sea

¹⁰Kingston's text also includes a parodic version of Daniel Defoe's tale of Robinson Crusoe. The chapter entitled "The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun" sheds additional light on Kingston's treatment of the ocean and islands. For an extensive analysis of Kingston's parody, see Monica Chiu's article "Being Human in the Wor(l)d: Chinese Men and Maxine Hong Kingston's Reworking of 'Robinson Crusoe'" (Chiu 2000). See also Eperjesi's analysis of the respective chapter in *China Men* (2005, 149–150).

¹¹*China Men* (1980) was published shortly after Kingston's well-known work *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976). Given the fact that Maxine Hong Kingston was vehemently attacked by Chinese American critics such as Frank Chin (1991) for *Woman Warrior* and labeled a writer of "the fake," the notion of "ocean people," the representation of the ocean as storyteller, and the overall style and structure of *China Men* might be of further interest to this debate as they underline the tension between storytelling, memory, and historiography, while also questioning assumptions of stability and fluidity of identities. In this regard, an interesting analysis of *China Men*'s structure is provided in Jinqi Ling's chapter "Maxine Hong Kingston's Remapping of Asian American Historical Imagination in *China Men*" (1998, 110–138) although Ling's discussion does not examine the specific role of the ocean.

journey she is to experience herself: “How was I to know that ten years later, when I turned eighteen, L. Ah Leong would pluck me from a ship where my baby and I were imprisoned by Immigration?” (3).

In fact, social and military conflicts quickly call into question Phoenix’s initially romanticized notion of mobility: from the first moment the possibility of the family’s relocation to Hawai‘i is discussed, the deteriorating security in China, as “warlords terrorized the country” and “China plunged in to chaos” (11), defines the context of transoceanic migration. Driven out of the country by the unrest in China, the situation in the Pacific hardly promises relief: “Tat-Tung searched for passage to Hawai‘i. He found no ships. In 1918, America was at war” (14). As America’s involvement in the war makes the escape to Hawai‘i both more urgent and dangerous, Tat-Tung takes his wife to Hong Kong despite her pregnancy; soon thereafter they board a ship with their newborn. Their maritime mobility is motivated by the desire to escape from the dangers of war and violence.

The movement of the ocean itself, however, becomes an existential threat for the passengers, which is only increased in light of the challenges Phoenix faces as a young mother on a ship: “The ship heaved to and fro, sliding me and baby Fung-Tai from one side of the cabin to the other. When I bathed her, the wash pan slid across the floor. The bath water flew up with each sway of the ship. ‘Wait, wait!’ I cried. My body was so light that I, too, rolled with each pitch of the ship. My milk stopped. Baby Fung-Tai wailed” (16). When Phoenix has to visit the bathroom, she has to leave her child alone “in the middle of the bed surrounded by pillows, and propped chairs along the side of the bed. One time, the ship rolled as if the seas meant to turn us upside down.” On her return, she finds “everything—chairs, pillows, bedding—strewn on the floor. I tore through the jumble. When I found my baby asleep in the middle of the bedspread, I collapsed, clutching her in my arms. My heart beat so loudly I thought it would explode through my chest and wake her. What have I gotten into? I cried” (16). As the ocean’s inherent movement threatens the child’s well-being aboard, the passage suggests that the specific challenges sea voyages present might also be determined by gender roles.

When Phoenix and her baby are threatened by immigration procedures upon the family’s arrival on the island of O‘ahu, her status as a woman becomes even more significant. Similar to Kingston’s depiction, the ship becomes a space that limits mobility and is perceived as a “prison” (18), a space of ultimate immobility, a situation that poses an increasing threat to

the child's very life: "There was more bewilderment when Immigration told Tat-Tung I could not be released for three weeks. They had too many Chinese to interview, check, and document. Three weeks! 'Your child and I will be dead by then,' I protested. I need a milk-nurse before the baby starves to death" (17). Despite her husband's assurance that she will soon be admitted to Hawai'i, Phoenix, left alone with her child aboard, is desperate since the life of her child is in danger: "If Tat-Tung were to return, he should come soon before the Immigration Office closed for the evening. Fung-Tai could not last another day without milk ..." (18). The sea voyage and her confinement on the ship highlight her vulnerability as a woman and the significance of her physical attributes as a mother, thus implying that maritime (im)mobility might constitute a different experience for men and women.

While the ocean, despite its dangers, was a source of hope in Kingston's *China Men*, the sea, with its color and breeze, offers minimal relief in *The Money Dragon* and stands in stark contrast to Phoenix's actual condition aboard: she continues to "pace[] the deck" like an animal trapped in a cage. And while the Money Dragon has the power to rescue his daughter-in-law and grandson in time, the promises of the Pacific paradise, Hawai'i, though close, remain out of reach for many others searching for opportunities or fleeing from violence and poverty in China. The ship that signified hope and escape becomes a space of immobility and despair as the Chinese, singled out among the passengers and separated from their family members, have to wait for and undergo the scrutiny of immigration procedures:

[E]ven those with legitimate papers were terrified of the Immigration interviews. The Inspectors separated husbands from wives, children from parents. After the standard questions of birth and names, they asked detailed questions about the number of rooms and doors and windows in one's house, the number of chickens and dogs a certain person owned, then fed wrong answers to other family members to confirm or deny. Any blunder was grounds for deportation. (19)

Both Kingston's detailed description of the father's sea voyage and Chun's account of her ancestors' plight on their transpacific journey voice ambivalence towards the ocean and maritime mobility in the Chinese American imaginary. Movement across and of the ocean promises opportunity but is juxtaposed with the actual limitation of human mobility caused not only

by the ocean itself, whose vastness and unpredictability often remains averse to human life, but, more importantly, by the restriction of mobility through US immigration laws.

ISLAND SOJOURNS

In much of Western literature, islands are celebrated as places distinct from yet available for EuroAmerican culture. Imagined as untouched by civilization, remote, and isolated, islands are often regarded as a “new Eden, a sociopolitical utopia,” places for communities, whose members live a life that remains free of the dictates of modern societies (DeLoughrey 2007, 8–9; 13). Despite the actual exploitation of island ecologies that transforms them into places of economic opportunity, exotic islands often become places of sexual adventure and represent what Rob Wilson has called, with respect to the Hawaiian islands, a “precapitalist *paradise*” (2000, 132). Isolation from the metropolises, endured by many Western protagonists in Robinsonades, is often experienced as a crisis but ultimately becomes an opportunity for the self-improvement of the colonial man who, after going through several stages of development, ultimately becomes the master of a colonized race that lives (or arrives) on the island (see DeLoughrey 2007, 12–14). Accordingly, island sojourns, to this day, often conjure the vision of pleasant stays on tropical islands, whose remoteness from the complexities of civilization allows for the rejuvenation of the Western visitor.

In contrast, islands that double as immigration stations, namely, Ellis Island and Angel Island, feature prominently in the Chinese American literary imaginary. The depictions of these islands in the texts I analyze in this essay are less romanticized and more ambiguous than those conventionally used in EuroAmerican representations. The two islands were chosen as locations for the detention centers because they allowed for the isolation and ‘processing’ of immigrants in the early twentieth century. Angel Island Immigration Station was opened in 1910; between 1910 and 1940, over 300,000 immigrants were detained on Angel Island, about a third of them Chinese (Lai, Lim, and Yung 2014a, 3). At the detention center, immigrants were segregated on the basis of gender, but also of race. The facilities reserved for whites were of higher quality, Caucasians received better treatment, and non-Asians had to undergo less severe medical examinations while those of Asian immigrants were considerably more extensive (14). The crowded and unhealthy conditions at the

detention center and the bad quality of the food contributed to a sense of humiliation and despair. Chinese immigrants had to face “longer and more exhaustive interrogations than ... any other immigrant group on Angel Island”; they often stayed on the island for a significant amount of time (sometimes up to over a year), saw the second-highest rate of rejection and deportation, and some of these rejected applicants decided to end their lives rather than face deportation (15, 21–25).¹²

In 1970, a park ranger noticed writing on the walls of the former immigration station on Angel Island. Members of the Asian American community collected and translated the poems, discovered additional poetry that was copied by two immigrants during their detention at the station, and conducted oral history interviews (Yung and Lim 2014, viii). In 1980, Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung published 135 poems (both in their original and translated versions) in a first edition of the anthology *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*. A few thousand Chinese immigrants were also detained at Ellis Island, mostly Chinese seamen who often arrived on the island after weeks at sea. When the Ellis Island immigration station was renovated in 1985, Chinese writing was similarly found on the walls (Lai, Lim, and Yung 2014b, 40). A number of these poems from Ellis Island—as well as some that were found at the immigration station at Victoria, British Columbia, Canada—were included in a second edition of the anthology. According to the editors of these poems, written on Ellis Island and Angel Island and depicting the experiences of Chinese immigrants there, constitute “the first literary body of work by Chinese [sic] in North America” (42).

Yunte Huang regards the Angel Island poems as expressions of resistance, as they “delineate historical trajectories that are in many ways unaccountable in canonical discourses” (2008, 102). Examining them “as examples of *tibishi* (poetry inscribed on a wall), a traditional form of travel writing,” Y. Huang explains that Chinese travelogues often become an alternative medium of historiography, since the documentation of history was limited to official historical accounts, and any act of historical writing,

¹²Detailed information on Angel Island Immigration Station and the treatment of Chinese migrants can be found in the introduction “Under the Shadow of Exclusion: Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island” in Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung’s *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (1980).

unless authorized, was punishable by law in China (102–103).¹³ In addition, their physical presence on the walls recalls that of graffiti, which is often understood in terms of defiance (see 109–110) as it provides not only a means of expression for disenfranchised groups but also represents, as an act of vandalism, a tool of resistance against the norms set by those in power.

Indeed, many of the poems that were found at the immigration stations reflect this defiance in their form as *tibishi* or graffiti-like inscriptions on the wall, as Y. Huang argues. Their words also express resistance against immigration procedures, voicing the hardship of their writers before and after the journey across the ocean. Some of the poems are explicitly concerned with oceanic mobility and its discontents while others display a conspicuous absence of the maritime surroundings that serve as confinement for the newly arrived immigrants. One poem from Ellis Island focuses on the injustice of the exclusion laws that have led to the writer's imprisonment, characterizing them as "oppressive laws" that have shattered his hopes to "be safe and free of sadness" in the United States ("Poems from Ellis Island" 2014, Poem 1, 6–9).¹⁴ Indeed, many of the poems stress the fact that the migration to the United States was rather a matter of necessity than one of choice. The Ellis Island poet outlines the circumstances that led to his transoceanic mobility as consequences of the Sino-Japanese War (see Lai, Lim, and Yung 1980, 180 n. 1) doubting that he will live a life "free of worry" while his family is completely dispersed and their home destroyed (Poem 1, 1–4). Writers from Angel Island share these concerns about the injustice of anti-Chinese immigration procedures and about the difficult, even threatening situation at home that compels them to attempt the sea journey in the first place.

A poem from Angel Island connects the ship voyage to the United States itself to the poverty the writer has faced at home. It was his poverty that has led him to leave his family behind and embark on the sea voyage across the Pacific ("The Voyage," 2014, Poem 15, 1–3). Similar to Chun's description of Phoenix's escape across the Pacific, the sea voyage and the detention

¹³Yunte Huang's (2008) chapter "The Poetics of Error: Angel Island" in *Transpacific Imagination: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* offers a detailed analysis of the significance of the subgenres and the role of translation for our (mis-)understanding of Angel Island poetry. I also encourage readers interested in maritime (im)mobilities in the Chinese American imaginary to explore oral histories, some of which have been collected in the anthology *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*, edited by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (1980).

¹⁴The poems published in the anthology are divided into sections and numbered, starting anew for each location. This poem is the first poem in the section "Poems from Ellis Island," translated by Charles Egan (see Lai, Lim, and Yung 1980, 52).

abroad are the result of dire circumstances at home: war or, in this latter case, poverty. Maritime mobility itself, here described as "drift[ing]," has to be passively endured and constitutes tremendous hardship for the migrant. Likewise, the poem that the editors chose as opening piece for the anthology describes the voyage and the arrival on the island as difficult: The ocean's movement is described as "twisting" and "turning," and is juxtaposed with the confinement of the "wooden building" that awaits the immigrant on the island ("The Voyage," 2014, Poem 1, 1–4).¹⁵ The fact that the unnerving sea voyage is followed by an equally distressing immobilization during the Chinese immigrants' detention on Ellis Island and Angel Island further highlights the migrants' vulnerability.

As another writer suggests, his confinement on the island is experienced as a long "sojourn in jail" that makes him suffer from "ordeals" and leaves little room for hope despite the fact that he can already catch sight of "Oakland so close by." It is effectively the insular location of the detention center that separates the writer from nearby Oakland. Thus, America, the country he has long adored, remains inaccessible. And although the writer expresses his desire to return to his home country, the description of the long and troubled sea passage suggests that this is not a desirable option either ("The Voyage," 2014, Poem 9, 1–8). Thus, the islands, rather than symbolizing places of paradise-like pleasures, represent places of imprisonment and disillusion where the Chinese remain trapped in a legal and personal limbo.

Genny Lim's 1978 play *Paper Angels* centers on the despair caused by this state of uncertainty and by the overall conditions on the island. Lim, who was involved in the Angel Island poetry project, was inspired by the writing found on the walls of the buildings on the immigrant station's walls to write her one-act play. First produced in San Francisco in 1980 and in New York in 1982, the play was lauded by critics and won several awards (O'Connor 1985; Liu 2002, 190, 194). It was performed numerous times and picked up by PBS for their *American Playhouse* series in 1985 (Gussov 1982; O'Connor 1985),¹⁶ and more recently in Seattle in 2015 (Berson 2015). Lim's "play examines the physical and psychic effects of detention, more broadly, of the 1882 Exclusion Act ... on four male and three female Chinese immigrants who crossed the vast ocean with dreams of success, only to be detained and humiliated" (G. Huang 2006, 100). The characters are "emblematic," reflecting the larger impact of Chinese Exclusion and immigration procedures on the Chinese immigrant

¹⁵This is the first poem from Angel Island in the anthology (see Lai, Lim, and Yung 1980, 46).

¹⁶For a selected production history, see Liu 2002 (189–200).

community as a whole, but they also claim “individual subjectivity” as Josephine Lee points out in her analysis of the play (1997, 151). The play is set in 1915 in the Angel Island Immigration Detention Center—information readers can derive from the secondary text at the very beginning of the play when time and location are included. Yet, with the exception of the Warden, none of the characters ever refer to the immigration station as detention center and none uses the designation Angel Island. Instead, the detainees refer to the location with words that describe more drastically their experience of confinement, such as “prison” (Lim [1978] 1993, 21, 44), “wooden cage,” or “cage full of lies” (45). They reduce the term “Angel Island” to simply “Island” (21, 25, 27, 42, 47), always used in capital letters—again with a single exception during the Warden’s monologue (46). In its importance for the detainees, the ‘Island’ thus eclipses all other islands and lacks any sign of maritime charm. Whenever the Chinese migrants use the term, they either emphasize the distance from the mainland, “And I say all of you on this Island (*Gesturing*) will taste fool’s gold. You know how I know? Because America is just (*Pointing to his head*) a faraway place in the mind—a piece of dream that scatters like gold dust in the wind” (25). Or they use it in close conjunction with the time frame of their imprisonment (21, 27). As in the case of the poetry that has inspired the play, the “Island” becomes, through its separation from the mainland, synonymous with imprisonment. Throughout, this sense of imprisonment remains closely connected to time and is reflected in the setting. Reviewers have pointed out that the “small stage” is “divided” and features a “compartmentalized design” for the 1982 Henry Street Settlement’s New Federal Theater performance in New York (Gussow 1982) while the set of the 1985 *American Playhouse* production “is abstract, a few props and architectural lines defining the necessary spaces” (O’Connor 1985). These choices reinforce the play’s claustrophobic quality suggested by Lim’s play. From the very beginning, a “*darkly lit dormitory*” functions as the setting for the opening scene, and the oppressive atmosphere is enhanced by the “*voice-over audio of an interrogation in progress*” that has the Chinese immigrants “*suspended in silent postures of expectation, longing and fear*” (Lim [1978] 1993, 19) and “[a] *low, continuous moan ... heard from off-stage,*” overshadowing the first scene.¹⁷ The moaning turns out to be coming from a Chinese immigrant whose three-year imprisonment at Angel Island seems to have left him mentally

¹⁷ John J. O’Connor points out that in the *American Playhouse* production, music was used to further enhance “the emotional weight of a scene” (1985).

disturbed and hallucinating. His lamentation perturbs his fellow internees (as one character puts it, "[h]e's driving me crazy," 21). The prologue and the first scene set the tone for the whole play: The dark and suffocating environment is enhanced by a disturbing sense of time as never-ending as repetitive interrogations are followed by monotonous periods of waiting, articulating immobility on the island in both temporal and spatial terms.

The relation between imprisonment and time is a recurring motif in the play. Similar to the disorientation BaBa experiences during his journey in Kingston's *China Men*, the Chinese inmates lose their sense of time in the detention center and try to measure time by marking off the days on a calendar (34). The Chinese inmates are repeatedly depicted as immobile and frozen in time, highlighting their powerlessness and immobility:

The inmates, men and women, stand by the poles (as in the opening) suspended in time, looking straight ahead. It's as if they have been stripped naked under surveillance, but their thoughts are what remain of themselves. The Inspector paces among them, referring to them in an objective interview manner. He occasionally gestures at them but for all intents and purposes, they are inanimate ... (36-37)

The inmates' subjection to surveillance and interrogation is heightened by their portrayal as "inanimate," a term that further denies the Chinese any claim to humanity. The immobility of the immigrants is again juxtaposed with the white's mobility just two scenes later when Henderson, one of the guards, vehemently complains about the Chinese (42), while "[t]he lights dim as the men stare ahead in frozen postures which convey their differing attitudes. Henderson enters, watching the men like specimens through an imaginary partition of glass" (42). The constellation echoes that of the scene before but is never used in reverse: The Chinese remain in a situation of immobility and powerlessness. Throughout the play, the detainees' psychological situation is described as dire and the characters vacillate between the desire to attack those holding them captive and to use violence against themselves (24, 29). Some characters finally resort to violence in order to overcome the temporal and spatial paralysis imposed upon them.

Their immobility and isolation is only emphasized by the few but significant reminders of the maritime location of the detention center and by a number of allusions to oceanic mobility. In one scene, the female inmates, led by Gregory, a missionary, sing "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean," a

song that highlights their “*unfamiliarity*” (25) with Western culture. Nevertheless, the fact that they “*sing with gusto and animation*” also underlines the women’s awareness of their situation on the island, separated from the Chinese homeland and the American mainland. Similarly, ships function as reminders of separation and distance from the continent rather than a means of transport to the US mainland. When mentioned, the ships either bring migrants (or witnesses in the immigration procedures) to the island or turn into vehicles of deportation—in both cases, maritime mobility is represented as a form of disappointment or even danger. From the first scene, the phrase “[t]hey’ll ship you back to China so fast!” (22; also 42) expresses the fear of deportation and remains the central, implicit threat throughout the play. The sea passage the migrants have endured to come to the United States is not devoid of risk either. The ship voyage proves especially dangerous for women, as some of the male inmates acknowledge. Fong, one of the Chinese men, reveals to his fellow inmates what happened to a woman on board his ship: “Everyone knows what happened to her on that ship. Unless you like white man’s leftovers, forget her” (34). The sexual violence alluded to in the men’s dialogue is absent in the description of the sea passage Chin Gung, a Chinese man on Angel Island, has undertaken. Rather he expresses the discrepancy between the hope that he experienced aboard and the disenchantment that characterizes his time on Angel Island: “I came on a ship full of dreams and landed in a cage full of lies” (45). Mere moments after making this statement, he decides to end his life when he fears he might be deported. The play ends with his widow’s refusal to leave Angel Island for the United States: In a final scene, accompanied by the sound of a foghorn—yet another reminder of the detention center’s maritime location—she reveals her yearning to return home. Her fate on the island exemplifies the legal and emotional limbo that has defined the depictions of Chinese American maritime (im)mobilities not only in this play about Angel Island but also in the poems found on the walls of the immigrations stations and the texts by Kingston and Chun.¹⁸

¹⁸Genny Lim admits that she actually toned down the suffering of the Chinese immigrants: “When I originally wrote the play, I deliberately tried to avoid depicting any of the real horror stories, because I was worried that people might think I was heightening reality by adding artificial moments of sensationalism. But history is sensationalistic. One woman, when she discovered that she and her three sons were going to be deported, was so distraught that she sharpened a chopstick, poked it into her ear and died instantly. Because the authorities feared a full-blown scandal, they allowed her sons to land. Though the story is true, I decided not to include it because it seemed so fantastic” (qtd. in Koyama 1985).

CONCLUSION

The representations of maritime (im)mobilities and oceanic experiences in the Chinese American texts analyzed in this essay are ultimately always determined by the specific historical context of Chinese exclusion that challenges any romanticized notion of transoceanic mobility. Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* outlines the metaphorical quality of the ocean and of water in detail. As the ocean becomes personified and inhabited by mythical figures that promise hope and support, water, at times, transforms into a connecting and renewing element. The account of the father's sea voyage echoes not only connotations conventionally attached to the very element itself but also the notions of newness, curiosity, and mobility that characterize Kingston's "ocean people." However, her memoir also portrays the oceanic experience as one defined by the material qualities of the ocean and the physical limitations of the human body: The father's inability to move in the wooden box to which he is confined during his traumatizing sea voyage is contrasted to the movement of the ocean which endangers and disorients him. Under these circumstances, the sea itself, though presenting a source of hope, also materializes as an environment inherently hostile to human survival. In Chun's *The Money Dragon*, the protagonist's romanticized view of sea travel, which opens the book, is equally followed by the account of the hardships during her family's transpacific passage. Her and her daughter's suffering is exacerbated by the physical limitations of the maternal body when her milk stops and she fears she can no longer nurse her child during her ongoing confinement on the ship. The hazards of the sea voyage and the subsequent detainment while waiting for the immigration procedures appear even more tragic in view of the family's abrupt and escape-like departure from China. The poems written on the walls of the immigration stations on Ellis Island and Angel Island reflect similar constraints in China that force their writers to leave their homeland: Violence and poverty drive them across the ocean to seek safety and better fortune in the United States. And as in Kingston's and Chun's accounts, the Chinese migrants encounter discomfort and dangers on their voyage before they face immigration procedures and imprisonment upon their arrival on the islands. The poems voice the migrants' discontent with the exclusion laws and distress in the face of their imprisonment. Genny Lim's play *Paper Angels* paints a suffocating picture of the conditions at Angel Island Detention Center and presents the disastrous effects of the migrants' imprisonment on their physical and

mental status. Maritime elements are mere reminders of the paralyzing immobility the detainees have to endure as they are neither prepared to return to China nor allowed to enter the United States. Similar to the father's temporal and spatial disorientation in Kingston's *China Men*, the migrants in *Paper Angels* are suspended in time and space and stuck in an emotional and legal limbo that defines the Chinese American experience of maritime (im)mobility throughout all of the texts discussed.

In *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, DeLoughrey explores the connection between time and space with regard to the ocean: While “theorists suggest that perceptions of time are constituted by physical and conceptual movement across terrestrial space,” the ocean as a space mostly devoid of geographic markers calls for another evaluation of time and space. DeLoughrey asks, “how one’s location in the perpetually moving ocean may produce alternative renderings of time-space” (2007, 2). In fact, the Chinese American representations largely reject conceptualizations of the ocean as transcending time and space; rather, the Chinese American writers and protagonists I have considered here inhabit a specific historical moment and geographical place in US history whose momentary loss of temporal and spatial orientation reflects their powerlessness. This disorientation and the ongoing traumatization are enhanced by the ocean’s properties as ever moving and devoid of distinct geographical markers. Yet, they are not a consequence of these oceanic qualities alone, as the continual reference to US immigration practices demonstrates. While the territorialization of the ocean remains a controversial topic (see DeLoughrey 2007, 30–41; Ganser in this volume), these texts suggest that US immigration practices have an effect beyond national borders. Asian immigrants and the complexities of their legal, political, and social exclusion have played an important role in the conceptualization of the US nation-state and American national culture as Lisa Lowe has argued in *Immigrant Acts* (1996, 2–9). The analysis of Chinese American ship voyages and island experiences demonstrates that while this negotiation occurs within or at the borders of the US nation-state, the process often begins in oceanic terrains—on ships and islands, outside of or at the fringes of national territory. As Kingston’s notion of “ocean people” suggests, it is the experience of maritime (im)mobilities that shapes the Chinese migrants and initiates their experience as (Chinese) Americans.

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