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Fragments of the Past: Archaeology, History, and the Chinese Railroad Workers of North America

过去的碎片：考古、历史与北美
地区的中国铁路工人

ABSTRACT

Although the labor of the Chinese workers who built the first transcontinental railroad (and other railroads in the western part of the country) was pivotal to the development of the United States, these workers have never received the scholarly attention they deserve. The incredibly rich work of archaeologists who have studied the thousands of pieces of material culture gathered along western rail lines promises to open vibrant new dimensions of historical recovery of this key chapter in the intertwined social, economic, and political histories of China and the United States.

尽管修建第一条横贯大陆铁路（以及其它美国西部铁路）的中国工人为美国的发展立下了汗马功劳，他们在学术界从未获得与其成就相称的关注。考古学家现已就西部铁路沿线搜集的数以千计的文物进行了研究。他们丰富的研究成果必将为中美两国之间错综复杂的社会、经济、政治历史中这一关键篇章开启生动的、崭新的历史维度。

In 1865 the Central Pacific Railroad Company introduced large numbers of Chinese workers on the western portion of the first transcontinental railway across North America. Four years later, largely because of their toil, Leland Stanford drove the famous “golden spike” at Promontory Summit, Utah, to complete the line. The labor of these Chinese workers, who eventually numbered between 10,000 and 12,000 at any one moment, was key to creating the immense wealth that Leland Stanford used to found Stanford University and was pivotal in the development of the United States, particularly the West. These workers have never received the scholarly attention they deserve: that Chinese worked on the railroad is common knowledge, but little is known about any dimension of their lives and experiences.

The given historical interpretation of the construction and completion of the transcontinental line is immensely deficient and one-sided in several ways. It is traditionally told as a story of national triumph and achievement, and as the culmination of “manifest destiny,” the ordained linking of the two coasts of North America and the physical connection of the nation; it is celebrated as the first step in healing the divisive wounds of the Civil War. The historical accounts of that achievement over the last hundred years have usually continued to play on these facets of the story. The contributions of the Chinese railroad workers are noted, but not fully appreciated, or omitted entirely. Whether an historical account celebrates the line as an accomplishment of the risk taking and acumen of the “Big Four” (the directors of the Central Pacific Railroad) or views it as an emblem of their Gilded Age financial machinations, the contributions of the Chinese railroad workers are overshadowed by the story of businessmen who benefited from their labor.

Challenging the narratives that focus on national triumph and the business elite is very difficult. It is always tough to “speak truth to power,” even when writing history. But beyond the ideological, the task is immense simply because the extant documentary record overwhelmingly favors the elites. The Big Four left voluminous personal archives (correspondence, diaries, and financial records) that tell the story from their points of view. The enormous (almost endless) paper archives of the railroad companies reflect managements’ points of view. From the Chinese workers, however, there is virtually nothing left today—not one letter, diary, memoir, or even a brief note. For the past century, researchers have searched for such material, but in vain. Nothing has yet been found in English or Chinese, in the United States or in China. Recovering their lived experiences and history beyond meager outlines has been a colossal, and frustrating, endeavor.

Here is the challenge: how do we as scholars give voice to the voiceless? How do we understand lived experience if we have nothing from the actors themselves? Is it possible to employ new methodologies of interpretation, beyond

the traditionally historical, to recover and interpret the past? These questions lie at the core of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University. The project was launched in 2012, with generous seed money from the president of Stanford, to reconstruct the lives and experiences of the Chinese men whose labor on the first transcontinental railroad helped shape the physical and social landscape of the American West (in addition to being the basis of the fortune that allowed Leland Stanford to found Stanford University). Recognizing that this key chapter of the past cannot be adequately addressed by scholars working in any one field, or on one side of the Pacific, the project brings together over 150 U.S. scholars in archaeology, anthropology, American studies, cultural studies, ethnic studies, history, literature, overseas Chinese studies, political science, and other fields. Between 2012 and 2014 the project has sponsored or cosponsored conferences at Stanford, in Taipei, and in Guangzhou. The fruits of this interdisciplinary and transnational collaboration will be publications in English and Chinese, and an open-access digital archive of primary materials.

For the past several years, we of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project have been engaged in the most thorough interdisciplinary search for source material ever undertaken. We have accumulated the largest collection of contemporary reports and first-person accounts of the building of the western portion of the transcontinental line and are continuing to search for those elusive documents from the Chinese workers themselves. We also are exploring new ways to try to reconstruct that lost history; this includes drawing on the incredibly rich work of archaeologists who have conducted field research and studied objects from the Chinese railroad workers who lived throughout the American West. This archaeological work on the thousands of pieces of material culture gathered along western rail lines has been one of the most exciting developments in the research of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project and promises to open vibrant new dimensions of historical recovery.

The articles in this special issue of *Historical Archaeology* are outstanding examples of the promise of the work that North American archaeologists have conducted over the

past several decades. The work that these archaeologists have done, largely completed independently of each other, is opening new vistas on Chinese immigrant life and railroad work in 19th-century North America, richly complementing textual materials. It is a truism that archaeologists dig down, that every excavation is by definition site-specific. In the case of the Chinese who worked on the first transcontinental railroad, however, one population literally moved along the roadbeds they were grading and the tracks they were laying across vast distances. Many of those individuals later moved on to work on rail lines elsewhere in the country—particularly in the American West—leaving material residues of their lives and their world wherever they went. Archaeologists at different sites may have been examining artifacts from some of the same individuals. At the very least, they were exploring material objects associated with individuals from many of the same towns and villages in China. This landmark issue brings together, in conversation for the first time, the research of archaeologists who have worked on often far-flung Chinese sites along the Central Pacific Railroad and other rail lines in the United States.

Each of the articles offers unique and careful study of a specific physical site, such as Summit Camp, or of a particular dimension of work and daily life on the line. The reader learns about foodways, health care, leisure activity, and ways of living and dying. Taken together, the studies help us as scholars to begin to learn even more. They offer tantalizing insights into social organization, interactions among Chinese and non-Chinese populations, and the conditions of life in a moving work environment. We can also begin to engage in comparative analysis; that is, we can begin to make some sense of rural vs. urban life; life in the American West vs. life in other locations where Chinese workers toiled, such as in the Canadian Rockies; life in the Sierras in the winter vs. life in the summer and in the desert. The picture of Chinese railroad worker life begins to become textured and dimensional, and moves beyond the simple and general.

Moreover, these essays from archaeologists are engaging those of us from other disciplines, such as traditional historical study and cultural studies, and encouraging us to see the past in new

ways. We are challenged to employ new ways of thinking and forms of evidence to develop interpretation in our writing and even in our ability to “visualize” the past through the use of mapping and other digital humanities approaches. All this is most exciting and promising. This issue is not so much an “end” product, but the announcement of a beginning of efforts in interdisciplinary collaboration.

It is also the beginning of a conversation that will be carried on across the country and across the Pacific. Placing the Chinese in the foreground of a narrative requires a rethinking of important contexts and vantage points long dominant in the telling of American national history. The story of the Chinese workers, an essential element of the railroad itself, is necessarily a story of trans-Pacific connections, of the intertwined social, economic, and political histories of China and the United States. It is a story of the Chinese diaspora and the overseas Chinese. It is also a story of ethnic America, a foundational experience in Asian American history. These different narratives and interpretive contexts must all be considered to construct a fuller, richer, and more comprehensive understanding of the history. This collaborative project engages and speaks to many important bodies of literature far beyond those of “the railroad” alone.

What next? These essays will encourage and advance interaction with other scholars around the world, especially in Asia. Already, scores of

colleagues in Asia are exploring this topic on their own, and these essays will no doubt inspire many of them to work with scholars based in the U.S. to examine this rich record of material culture. What perspectives and information they will contribute to the understanding of potsherds originating in southern China, gaming pieces, spiritual objects, food remnants, apparel, construction and work skills, and beyond, one can only begin to speculate.

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