Historiography of Recovery and Interpretation of the Experience of Chinese Railroad Workers in North America

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Survey of Different Narrative Tracks

There is a major library of books about building the first transcontinental railroad, and the railroad figures greatly in the many books that tell the overall story of U.S. expansion in the West. This survey does not review every book but focuses on treatment of the Chinese workers in a variety of texts in U.S. and Chinese accounts. Most of these studies pay limited attention to the Chinese workers. Writers had no access to documents by the Chinese workers and limited knowledge of the culture of their home villages in Guangdong province; consequently, it was very difficult for non-Chinese writers to present the Chinese perspective. General histories of the construction of the
transcontinental involving both the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads follow several parallel tracks as two transcontinental projects race to meet, ultimately, in Utah.

These narrative tracks include the stories of the entrepreneurs who raise funds and wrestle with politicians; the stories of surveyors and engineers who designed the effort, which includes the managers who lead the construction of both railroads; along with limited accounts of the Chinese, Irish, Mormons, and other groups who did the work. Another track is to follow the consequences of building the railroad, such as the creation of new towns (for example Reno, Nevada), and the economic scandals following the completion of the railroad, such as the Credit Mobilier scandal targeting the UPRR. Another significant thread is the violence done to native peoples who resisted the expropriation of their land and the violation of their way of life, particularly the Plains Indians who faced a war of extermination conducted by William Tecumseh Sherman on behalf of the Union Pacific RR. In addition to the essay below, see the extensive research bibliography.

**Key Texts**

Key texts since 1945 include Wesley Griswold, *A Work of Giants: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962) and George Kraus, *High Road to Promontory: Building the Central Pacific across the High Sierra* (Palo Alto, CA: American West, 1969). High Road to Promontory is unique in that the narrative only follows the history of the CPRR. The CPRR was called the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1969, and SPRR sponsored the publication of the book to coincide with the 100th commemoration of the Golden Spike ceremony on May 10, 1969. Kraus actually pulls together the work of Robert Hancocks who died before the book was completed. Whether by design or by the force of circumstances, High Road to Promontory is virtually a collection of primary sources – memoirs, testimonies, journalistic observations, and more - woven together to tell the story. In that regard, it has long been a gold mine for researchers.

No Longer Nameless

An important work on the experience of Chinese railroad workers on the Central Pacific is William F. Chew, *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad: The Chinese Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford, 2003). Chew, a descendant of a railroad worker and an engineer by profession, was not a trained historian, but an engineer with a cause. He addresses different issues in a methodical manner, such as estimating the number of workers who died on the job. Chew, who passed away several years ago, approaches the topic of the Chinese and the transcontinental railroad with passion and seriousness, so that everyone following him has had to draw upon his work as a resource, accepting or rejecting Chew’s sources and statistical analysis.

Although not a book, the Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum (http://cprr.org/Museum/index.html) is a major source of photographs, documents, and debate organized by railroad enthusiasts and experts associated with the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento. The site is often hard to follow and visually cluttered, but it contains valuable memoirs, Senate testimonies, letters, books, newspaper stories, original essays, and other rare material. If you have the patience to search it is well worth it. Some of the debates in the framing texts and discussion groups have been sharp, drawing in William F. Chew, particularly concerning whether or not Chinese hung from baskets and how many Chinese worked and died in the course of building the railroad. Calvin Miaw compares the outlooks of “often highly contested” interpretations and even contested facts concerning the history of the Chinese and the railroad. Miaw examines the CPRR Museum website, Chew’s study, and Alexander Saxton’s earlier study, “The Army of Canton in the High Sierra,” in “Three Interpretations of the Role of Chinese Railroad Workers in the Construction of the Central Pacific Railroad. Readers can find Miaw’s study in the “Web Exclusive Essays” in the Publications section of this website.

**CPRR Management and Economics**

focuses on large-scale extractive and other industries of the West in the late 19th century, particularly analyzing the value of Chinese labor in relation to other labor-management relations, including the strategies management used to divide and control workers.

Relations with Irish and Others


Early Chinese Immigration

Studies in China


Innovation by Archaeologists

Archaeologists have over many years collected an enormous amount of artifacts that Chinese railroad workers left behind. The Archaeology Network of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project, under the leadership of Stanford archaeologist Barbara Voss, brought scores of scholars together to engage in an unprecedented collaboration and dialogue with scholars from other disciplines. They made fascinating, original contributions that add substantially to what we understand about the daily lives of the workers, examining artifacts from construction campsites, Chinatowns, and other sites to draw a richer understanding of the early Chinese American community. See, for example, the special issue of Historical Archaeology, “The Archaeology of Chinese Railroad Workers in North America,” (49, no. 1 [2015]), which includes Barbara Voss, “The Historical Experience of Labor: Archaeological Contributions to Interdisciplinary Research on Chinese Railroad Workers” and Mary Praetzellis and Adrian Praetzellis, “Commentary on the Archaeology of Chinese Railroad Workers in North America: Where Do We Go from Here?” Priscilla Wegars, ed., Hidden Heritage: Historical Archaeology of the Overseas Chinese (London: Routledge, 2016) includes several essays that discuss the railroad. Mary Maniery, Rebecca Allen, Sarah Christine Heffner, Finding Hidden Voices of the Chinese Railroad Workers (The Society for Historical Archaeology, 2016) is a wonderful introduction to the story of the Chinese railroad workers by means of archaeological findings. The book aims at a wider audience, rather than an academic one, employing a popular and readable magazine-type layout style with engaging illustrations and photographs.
Visual Representations


Chinese American Creative Works


Current Publications of the Project at Stanford University

In the past, many studies about the Chinese and the railroad were constrained by lack of sources and were limited in their scope and their perspectives. The publications by the Chinese Railroad Workers in North American Project at Stanford do much to expand our understanding of the Chinese workers. The single most comprehensive narrative account of the Chinese who built the CPRR is Gordon H. Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019). Chang, co-director of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project, draws on the new research inspired by the Project. *Ghosts of Gold Mountain* incorporates Chinese sensibilities in the mid-19th century, bringing cultural perspectives to the narrative lacking in most U.S. historians. Working without any documents from the workers themselves, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain* addresses this
persistent problem with ingenuity, deriving fresh takes on the narrative through inference of indirect sources. For example, while Chinese workers would suffer through bitter winters, there are no accounts by them; but there is an account by a white surveyor that helps illuminate what the Chinese workers endured. Chang also faces major questions, such as the number of workers who died building the railroad, whether or not Chinese workers hung from baskets to place explosives, and whether or not the Chinese workers won or lost their strike in June 1867, with the broadest assemblage of material available and clear, perceptive analysis.

The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad is the culmination of years of research by over 100 scholars in North America and Asia involved in the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project. This volume is a major breakthrough, involving academics in a trans-Pacific effort to delve into a wide variety of issues pertaining to the workers. After an introduction that gives an overview of the history of the workers and the railroad, Gordon Chang frames the volume with “Chinese Railroad Workers and the US Transcontinental Railroad in Global Perspective,” and in the final essay he closes the volume with a deeper understanding of the family that founded the university named for their son with wealth in great part derived from Chinese labor in “The Chinese and the Stanfords: Nineteenth-Century America’s Fraught Relationship with the China Men.”


The Chinese and the Iron Road also includes studies on the cultural and social dynamics of the railroad workers, such as: Hsinya Huang, “Tracking Memory: Encounters between Chinese Railroad Workers and Native Americans” and Kathryn Gin Lum, “Religion on the Road: How Chinese Migrants Adapted Popular Religion to an American Context.” Shelley Fisher Fishkin, in “The Chinese as Railroad Builders after Promontory,” examines the numerous railroads from coast to coast that Chinese workers built after the Golden Spike on Promontory Summit, and, going beyond the U.S., Zhongping Chen


Several essays examine historical memory of the workers, such as Pin-chia Feng’s literary commentary in “History Lessons: Remembering Chinese Railroad Workers in Dragon’s Gate and Donald Duk,” and Dennis Khor examines historical images in “Railroad Frames: Landscapes and the Chinese Railroad Worker in Photography, 1865–1869.” Historians have previously employed sources only in English, but Greg Robinson expands the scope of insights in “Les fils du ciel: European Travelers’ Accounts of Chinese Railroad Workers.” Most people in the U.S. learn of the Chinese and the railroad in a few sentences or paragraphs in their high school textbooks. William Gow examines how their image has been conveyed and distorted in the context of the early Chinese American community overall in “The Chinese Railroad Worker in United States History Textbooks: A Historical Genealogy, 1849–1965.”

Other publications of the project include additional web-only essays, a digital visualization of the Geography of Chinese railroad workers, and nearly forty video interviews with descendants of railroad workers, which honor their ancestor’s labor as well as valuable information on the fate of their families. With the 150th anniversary of the completion of the first transcontinental railroad there has been a spurt of research, which includes the National Park Service that already publishes an excellent history of the Golden Spike ceremony May 10, 1869. With the support of the State of Utah and other entities, more research and more materials may be forthcoming. One heartening development is the launching of the Irish Railroad Workers Project by Barry McCarron to gather materials to examine the lived experience of the Irish and others who also worked on the railroad. We have good reason to hope that the days are gone of superficial understanding and marginalization in the accounts of this crucial part of U.S. history.