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

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This survey draws from the research for *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*, eds. Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin with Hilton Obenzinger and Roland Hsu (Stanford University Press, 2019); and *Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad*, by Gordon H. Chang (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

## **Survey of Different Narrative Tracks**

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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 Tecumsah Sherman on behalf of the Union Pacific RR. In addition to the essay below, see the extensive research bibliography.

## Key Texts

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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 100<sup>th</sup> 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.

John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) is based on solid research, and Williams is somewhat sensitive to the experience of the Chinese workers. David Haward Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1999) is well written, thoroughly researched and covers all aspects of both railroads in depth. Stephen Ambrose, *Nothing Like It in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1863–1869* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) is perhaps the most readable and popular account, although somewhat superficial.

## 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://cpr.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

There are also accounts of the management of the railroad, such as the classic by Oscar Lewis, *The Big Four: The Story of Huntington, Stanford, Hopkins, and Crocker, and of the Building of the Central Pacific* (New York: Knopf, 1938); William Deverell, *Railroad Crossing Californians and the Railroad, 1850–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) focuses on the railroads and California history, while Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Norton, 2012) surveys the often devastating economic effects and corruption of the transcontinental railroads. Recently there have been in-depth economic analyses, such as David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), that

focuses on large-scale extractive and other industries of the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> 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**

More studies have appeared about the Chinese workers in relation to the Irish and others. Ryan Dearing, *The Filth of Progress: Immigrants, Americans, and the Building of Canals and Railroads in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016) uncovers the history of the “filth,” those workers whose labor built “progress” but were exploited and treated with disdain. Dearing recounts the histories of several projects, culminating in the transcontinental railroad, in which he examines the dynamics between Irish and Chinese (and to a lesser degree Mormons) about race and their differing ideas of masculinity, work, and cultural practices. Barry McCarron, in “The Global Irish and Chinese: Migration, Exclusion, and Foreign Relations among Empires, 1784-1904” (diss. Georgetown University, 2016), makes comparative study at a worldwide level, examining intersections of race, class, ethnicity, and gender between Chinese and Irish workers in Australia, Canada, and the U.S. Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019) considers the construction of the railroad and its effects on Native people and the Chinese migrant workers, analyzing the development of the railroad as part of colonial, imperial development.

## **Early Chinese Immigration**

Several books pay close attention to the Chinese railroad workers in the context of early Chinese immigration, such as Alexander Saxton's aforementioned early essay, “The Army of Canton in the High Sierra” *Pacific Historical Review*, 35:2 (May 1966). “The Army of Canton” is pathbreaking and remains an important short study of Chinese labor on the Central Pacific. Thomas W. Chinn, H. Mark Lai, and Philip P. Choy, editors, *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969) is a breakthrough history of the early California Chinese community. George Kraus, author of *High Road to Promontory*, also produced an early account in “Chinese Laborers and the Construction of the Central Pacific,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 37:1 (1969). Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) is a major account of Chinese labor and how the “Chinese Must Go” exclusion movement shaped the white trade-union movement.

## Studies in China

Studies in China include Annian Huang, ed., *The Silent Spikes: Chinese Laborers and the Construction of North American Railroads*, trans. Zhang Juguo (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2006); Annian Huang, “The Construction of the Central Pacific Railroad by Chinese Workers and the Rise of the United States,” *Issues in History Teaching* 6 (2007); Chen Hansheng 陈翰笙编, ed., *Huagong chuguo shiliao huibian* 华工出国史料汇编 [Collection of the Historical Materials about the Overseas Chinese Laborers], vol.7 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1984); and Sheng Jianhong, 美国中央太平洋铁路建设中的华工 [Chinese Builders of the US Central Pacific Railroad], 中西书局 (Shanghai : Zhong xi shu ju, 2015). Recent work includes 北美鐵路華工：歷史、文學與視覺再現 [Chinese Railroad Workers in North America: Recovery and Representation], edited by Hsinya Huang [黃心雅] (Taipei: Bookman [台北：書林出版社], 2017). Only recently has this research moved beyond relying on materials from the United States used by American historians.

## 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

Studies have been produced about the railroad Chinese and photography, painting, and other arts, such as Glenn Willumson, *Iron Muse: Photographing the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) and Denise Khor, “Archives, Photography, and Historical Memory: Tracking the Chinese Railroad Worker in North America,” *Southern California Quarterly* 98, no. 4 (Winter 2016) and Hsinya Huang 台北: 國立臺灣大學出版社, ed., 北美鐵路華工的歷史, 文學與視覺再現 [Recovering/Representing Chinese Railroad Workers: History, Literature, and Visual Arts](Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2017); Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Seeing Absence, Evoking Presence: History and the Art of Zhi Lin,” in *Zhi Lin: In Search of the Lost History of Chinese Migrants and the Transcontinental Railroads* (Tacoma, WA: Tacoma Art Museum, 2017).

## Chinese American Creative Works

Chinese American writers have produced memoir, fiction, drama, and historical narrative on the railroad worker experience, such as Lisa See, *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese American Family* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and David Henry Hwang, *The Dance and the Railroad and Family Devotions: Two Plays* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1983). Frank Chin, *Chinaman Pacific & Frisco RR Co.* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1988) and Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Vintage, 1989) provide vivid fictional accounts, as also does Shawn Wong, *Homebase (New York: Plume, 1991)*; and Laurence Yep, *Dragon's Gate* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1993).

## Current Publications of the Project at Stanford University

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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.”

Importantly, *The Chinese and the Iron Road* includes essays by Chinese scholars that examine life in the home villages of the railroad workers and the economic system that grew out of their needs to send remittances home: Zhang Guoxiong, with Roland Hsu, “The View from Home: Dreams of Chinese Railroad Workers across the Pacific,” Yuan Ding, with Roland Hsu, “Overseas Remittances of Chinese Laborers in North America,” and Liu Jin, with Roland Hsu, “Chinese Railroad Workers’ Remittance Networks: Insights Based on Qiaoxiang Documents.” Evelyn Hu-DeHart draws upon an important Qing Dynasty source in “Chinese Labor Migrants to the Americas in the Nineteenth Century: An Inquiry into Who They Were and the World They Left Behind.” Yuan Shu presents a comprehensive literature review of how the railroad workers in Chinese texts in “Representing Chinese Railroad Workers in North America: Chinese Historiography and Literature, 1949–2015.”

*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

examines “The Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Transpacific Chinese Diaspora, 1880–1885.” Essays that focus on other aspects of the experience of the railroad workers include Sue Fawn Chung, “Beyond Railroad Work: Chinese Contributions to the Development of Winnemucca and Elko, Nevada” and Beth Lew-Williams, “The Remarkable Life of a Sometime Railroad Worker: Chin Gee Hee, 1844–1929.”

Essays by archaeologists focus on the daily lived experiences of the workers: Barbara L. Voss, “Archaeological Contributions to Research on Chinese Railroad Workers in North America” and “Living between Misery and Triumph: The Material Practices, of Chinese Railroad Workers in North America”; Kelly J. Dixon, “Landscapes of Change: Culture, Nature, and the Archaeological Heritage of Transcontinental Railroads in the North American West”; and J. Ryan Kennedy, Sarah Heffner, Virginia Popper, Ryan P. Harrod, and John J. Crandall, “The Health and Well-Being of Chinese Railroad Workers.”

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 150<sup>th</sup> 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.