
Uncovering and Understanding the Experiences of Chinese Railroad Workers in Broader Socioeconomic Contexts

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Chinese immigrant workers played an indispensable and prominent role in the profound socioeconomic transformation of the United States in the late 19th century. Their work on the first transcontinental railroad spurred the rapid growth of the American economy, and also provided the foundation for a transpacific cultural and socioeconomic network of migration, labor, and commerce. Understanding such connections helps us appreciate the experiences of Chinese railroad workers not only as an important part of the transformation of America but also as a significant chapter in Chinese-American history. In the ensuing years, such a chapter was largely erased from American political and historical narratives, and the study below aims to shed new light on recent research and materials to recover and more deeply understand the experience and legacy of the Chinese railroad workers.

During the last three decades of the 19th century, the United States underwent tremendous economic expansion. Scholars have acknowledged that “the railroad was the chief agent” in the profound transformation of the country during this period.¹

Drastically enhancing the connection between the East Coast and the West, railroads played an extremely important role in the development of a coherent national market. An overland transcontinental trip took as long as six months before the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869. The railroad made the transportation of goods faster and easier. In 1876 the Transcontinental Express train traveled from New York to San Francisco in less than 84 hours. By 1900, five transcontinental railroads² as well as numerous regional ones had been built with a total of 215,000 miles of tracks – at the time more than the combined length of rail lines in all of Europe. By comparison, in Europe, for every 10,000 people, there were 7.4 kilometers of rail lines, compared to 41.4 kilometers per 10,000 people in the United States.³ Transcontinental railroads also effectively prompted U.S. employers to reach out to the markets of labor and resources in countries in the Pacific region, including China, helping it to become a global power. At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States overtook Britain in both per capita income and industrial output and became a global manufacturing leader.⁴

¹ Albro Martin, *Railroads Triumphant: The Growth, Rejection, and Rebirth of a Vital American Force* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 62.

² Library of Congress, “Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900: Railroads in the Late 19th Century,” <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/riseind/railroad/>, <Accessed August 1, 2014>.

³ William Z. Ripley, *Railroads, Rates and Regulations* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922), 35.

⁴ Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), vol. 2, 380.

The Chinese were key to these transformations. Without the Chinese, *The Daily Morning Chronicle* wrote in 1869, “the Pacific railroad would not be to-day an accomplished fact.”⁵ As early as 1858 fifty Chinese laborers worked to extend the California Central Railroad to Marysville.⁶ By 1865, large numbers of Chinese workers had begun to work on the construction of the first transcontinental railroad. In November 1866, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that there were about 12,000 Chinese men working on the roadbed in California.⁷ By 1869, ninety percent of the workforce working on the Central Pacific line (CPRR) was Chinese,⁸ a figure that represented about nineteen percent of the entire Chinese population in the United States at the time.⁹ Railroad building also facilitated the dispersal of the Chinese population from the West to the Midwest, the East Coast, and the South.¹⁰

Chinese immigrant laborers on the railroad faced significant hardships and dangers. In the Sierra Nevada, for example, they worked under heavy snow in three shifts in order to keep the work going, working at night “by light of sage-brush bonfires.”¹¹ A San Francisco-based newspaper reported in March 1867: “The snows are still heavy on the Sierras, and the Overland Mail schedule time has not yet been decreased. . . . The thousands of Chinamen who are employed on this end of the road have not been interrupted this season and the work continues to push along as rapidly as labor can drive

⁵ “A Soothing View of that Terrible Individual, Mr. John Chinaman,” *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, May 15, 1869, 2.

⁶ Thomas W. Chinn, Editor; H. Mark Lai, Philip P. Choy, Associate Editors, *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969), 43.

⁷ “The Pacific Railroad: Progress at the Western End,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 9, 1866, 2. In his 1968 *High Road to Promontory*, George Kraus estimated that there were 11,000 Chinese laborers working for the Central Pacific Railroad. See Michael R. Polk, et al., comp., “From Lampo Junction to Rozel: The Archaeological History of the Transcontinental Railroad across the Promontory Mountains, Utah,” *Golden Spike National Historic Site Synthesis Report* (April 5, 2012), 76.

⁸ Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 80.

⁹ There were 63,199 Chinese (58,633 men and 4,566 women) in the United States in 1870.

U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United State: From Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), 9.

¹⁰ For an overview of other rail lines in the U.S. on which the Chinese worked after the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, see Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “The Chinese as Railroad Builders After Promontory,” in Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, ed. *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Chinese Railroad Workers in North America* (forthcoming) and Fishkin, 從天使城到長島：美洲橫貫鐵路竣工後在美國的鐵路華工[“From Los Angeles to Long Island: Chinese Railroad Workers in America after the Transcontinental”]. In 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], edited by Hsin-ya Huang. 台北：國立臺灣大學出版社. Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2017.

¹¹ Edwin L. Sabin, *Building the Pacific Railway* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1919), 196.

it.”¹² The conditions under which Chinese laborers worked could sometimes be fatal. At the end of 1866 an entire “gang” of Chinese laborers on the Central Pacific Railroad were buried by a snow slide, and five of them died before they could be exhumed.¹³ An accident on the Western Pacific Railroad in November 1869 killed five Chinese workers and injured another.¹⁴ In addition to fatal accidents in the winter, in the summer of 1868, for example, several Chinese men were killed by falling rocks near the CPRR Summit Tunnel.¹⁵ According to a newspaper account, the explosives that they used to make the tunnels sometimes ignited before they could get to safe shelter.¹⁶ The exact number of workers who lost their lives building the first Transcontinental Railroad is not known because records were not kept.¹⁷

The Chinese Worker Experience

The Central Pacific Railroad of California started to use Chinese labor because it could not find enough white laborers. Lewis M. Clement, Chief Assistant Engineer of the railroad company, explained that California’s non-Chinese laborers “were mainly miners accustomed to work in placer mines or not, as it suited them. Mining was more to their liking than the discipline of railroad work. They were indifferent, independent, and their labor high priced. Labor sufficient for the rapid construction of the Central Pacific was not then on the coast.”¹⁸

Such a shortage of reliable labor similarly led the Chinese to be hired to build railroads elsewhere. The Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad, for example, started to use Chinese labor after its efforts to find African American and white workers failed. In 1870 John C. Stanton, head of the railroad company offered a long explanation of his decision. First, he discussed the difficulties in finding sufficient non-Chinese labor in spite of his efforts:

¹² *California China Mail and Flying Dragon*, March 1, 1867, 1.

¹³ “California,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 1866, 1.

¹⁴ “More Railroad Accidents,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 21, 1869, 1.

¹⁵ *The New York Times*, June 21, 1868, 1.

¹⁶ Jean F. Blashfield, *The Transcontinental Railroad* (Minneapolis: Compass Point Books, 2002), 23; Sabrina Crewe and Michael V. Uschan, *The Transcontinental Railroad* (Milwaukee: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2004), 14.

¹⁷ William Chew estimates that as many as 2000 may have perished, but this number has been challenged by others. William Chew, *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad: The Chinese Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad* (Victoria, Canada, 2004), 94.

¹⁸ John Debo Galloway, *The First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Simmons-Boardman, 1950), 144.

“The progress of the road has not been near as great as was anticipated by me, and why? Simply because I have not been able to obtain or retain sufficient labor. I have had my agents at every point in the border Southern States, where labor is usually to be had, offering unusual inducements to laborers. I have gradually raised the pay per diem from \$1.15 to \$1.75. I have advanced the cost of transportation, and have done everything that seemed reasonable, to obtain sufficient colored labor to build my road. Not succeeding, I commenced the importation of white laborers, and paid all the expenses of getting Irish and Germans from New York and Cincinnati; sent them on to my works, providing tents, tools and everything for their welfare. In two months after they commenced work I had hardly enough left to organize one small sized squad of about fifty men.”¹⁹

At that point, he turned to Chinese labor, which he regarded as “something that I can depend upon; something that will enable me to inform you in thirty days how many miles of road I will build.” He assured his non-Chinese audiences that using Chinese labor was “not for the purpose of reducing wages, superseding any particular class of labor, or for political buncombe.” “On the contrary,” he continued, “I am still prepared and will hire every able bodied colored or white laborer that presents himself on my works at the rate of one dollar and seventy-five cents per day. Let them all come, and accept my assurance of steady work and prompt pay. It is my earnest conviction that twenty thousand laborers, in addition to those already in Alabama, could find immediate and profitable employment if they choose to seek it; and this new element will stimulate rather than depress all kinds of enterprises in this section of the country.”²⁰

The experiences of the Chinese railroad workers mirrored those of their countrymen working elsewhere. Scholars have characterized early Chinese American communities as “bachelor societies” because they were predominated by men. Indeed, all of the Chinese railroad workers were male. The Chinese working on the Central Pacific Railroad were divided into gangs of 20 to 40 people and “lived together primarily in canvas tents along the grade and at more long term camps in log huts furnished by the company”²¹ The camps consisted mostly of tents.²² In both their work and living spaces, these Chinese railroad workers lived a segregated life. It is common knowledge that they received considerably less pay than white workers. For example, out of their monthly wage of about \$30 that a Chinese worker received from the Central Pacific, he had to pay for his food, which cost

¹⁹ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, July, 27, 1870.

²⁰ “Western Pacific Railroad,” *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, May 30, 1869, 1.

²¹ Michael R. Polk, et al., “From Lampo Junction to Rozel: The Archaeological History of the Transcontinental Railroad across the Promontory Mountains, Utah,” *Golden Spike Synthesis Report* (2012), 156; “Western Pacific Railroad: Progress of the Work of Construction,” *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, June 4, 1869.

²² “Western Pacific Railroad: Progress of the Work of Construction,” *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, June 4, 1869.

about \$10 a month. By comparison, Irish laborers were each paid \$35 and were given free board.²³ *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported in 1869 that among the 16,000 laborers building the railroad west of the San Joaquin River, the 1,000 Chinese were paid “only \$32 per month without any board” while the white men, mostly Irish, working on the tunnel received \$35 to \$40 per month and board.²⁴

This pattern of exploitation and segregation was repeated elsewhere. Chinese laborers in the Southern Pacific Railroad in Texas in the 1880s, for example, were paid half the wages received by whites. Their camps were distant from the tracks, far removed from where white workers lived. And there were troops stationed nearby to prevent them from escaping their contracts and to protect them from white workers.²⁵

In many cases, the Chinese gangs had white foremen. The Chinese workers elected their own group leaders, who interacted with their white employers, collecting all wages and handing over the remaining wages, usually about twenty dollars, to each worker.²⁶ There is evidence that some Chinese group leaders also had some facility with spoken English. The Chinese workers building the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad, for instance, had an interpreter named Wong Wing.²⁷ The Chinese workers who left San Francisco for Texas in December 1869 under a three-year contract, for example, had a “headman” named Chew Ah Heang, who also acted as their interpreter.²⁸

In an English-language article published in 1869, the *California China Mail and Flying Dragon* asserted that in areas where Chinese laborers built railroads, there was little anti-Chinese prejudice: “The prejudice against Chinese laborers has materially weakened throughout the interior. In the counties through which the various railroads are building, Chinamen meet with no opposition.”²⁹ However in reality the animosity was broad and deep.

²³ PBS, “Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/terr-cpr/>; Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum, “Chinese-American Contribution to Transcontinental Railroad,” <http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese.html>, <Accessed August 1, 2014>; “John Chinaman--What Shall We do with Him?,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1869, 4; John Debo Galloway, *The First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Simmons-Boardman, 1950), 144-145.

²⁴ “Western Pacific Railroad: Progress of the Work of Construction,” *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, June 4, 1869.

²⁵ Theresa Ann Case, *The Great Southwest Railroad Strike and Free Labor* (Texas A&M University Press: College Station, Texas, 2010), 90.

²⁶ John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, a division of Random House, 1988), 98 and 157.

²⁷ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, March 21, 1871.

²⁸ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*. December 31, 1869.

²⁹ *California China Mail and Flying Dragon*, March 1, 1867, 1.

Anti-Chinese sentiment in some cases fueled blatant violence. In 1871, white laborers employed in the city of Nevada, California, drove off the Chinese workers laboring on the railroad, destroying their tents and buildings.³⁰ *The San Francisco Chronicle* characterized the act of robbing Chinese men working on the railroad and elsewhere as a “California custom.”³¹ The culprits in anti-Chinese violence often escaped punishment. One of the Chinese men building railroads in Alabama in 1870 was killed by “a blow from a brutal and reckless white overseer . . . and the officers of the law have taken no notice of the murder, and the overseer continued in office over another gang.”³²

Those committed violence against the Chinese did so with impunity because anti-Chinese racism was institutionalized. In 1867 a man was convicted based on his confession that he robbed a Chinese man. The California Supreme Court later reversed the conviction.³³ The most important reason why the culprits “have invariably escaped the punishment of the law” was that Chinese Americans were not allowed to testify.³⁴ Section 14 of California’s Criminal Practice Act of 1850 stipulated: “No black, or Mulatto, person, or Indian, shall be allowed to give evidence in favor, or against a white man.” In *People v. Hall*, a California Supreme Court case in 1854, this important legal principle was extended to the Chinese. This law remained in effect until 1873.

Anti-Chinese violence was pervasive, and the perpetrators were not only Caucasian. A group of Chinese men were attacked in 1867 by three highwaymen in Nevada County, where Chinese laborers worked to build railroads. One of the three men, an African American, was apprehended released without conviction because in court Chinese testimony was not allowed. The Chinese could not testify, Judge Niles said, because they were heathens.³⁵ Two years later, another black man named George Washington was convicted for robbing Chinese men based on Chinese testimony that was allowed under the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution. But the Supreme of California reversed the decision, and he was set free.³⁶

African American railroad workers also demonstrated animosity toward their Chinese counterparts, and the conflict was fomented by the railroad company, which brought the Chinese so that they would “exert a fine moral influence” on African American railroad workers. “The negroes have no

³⁰ “Pacific Coast,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 1870, 1.

³¹ “The Chinese Immigration,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 9, 1869, 2.

³² *The New North-West*, November 25, 1870, 1.

³³ *The People v. James Jones*; Supreme Court of California; 31 Cal. 565; 1867 Cal. LEXIS 7; January 1867.

³⁴ “Desperadoes Caught,” *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, May 19, 1869; 4.

³⁵ “Californian Affairs,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 1867, 2.

³⁶ “San Francisco,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 1869, 2.

love for them, and they have not much for the negroes. A difficulty occurred between the Chinese and the negroes on the road last week,"³⁷ reported the *Memphis Daily Appeal*.

Anti-Chinese prejudice was by no means only a local or regional matter. It also became evident in national politics. In February 1869 during the U.S. Senate debate of the Fifteenth Amendment, a senator from Oregon proposed an addition: "Chinamen not born in the United States and Indians not taxed should not be deemed or made citizens." A month later a California congressman tried to introduce a resolution stating "in passing the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States the House never intended that the Chinese or Mongolians should become voters."³⁸ While the proposed addition and resolution were temporarily rejected by the senate and the house, respectively, these two proposals give us a glimpse into the magnitude of anti-Chinese racism. Within the next few years, in 1882, the first Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited the naturalization of Chinese immigrants.

The Chinese, however, were not merely passive victims. They negotiated for higher pay with their employers using competition and other factors. In 1869 the Central Pacific management had to raise the pay to \$35 a month when it bought Chinese laborers to work on the difficult Summit Tunnel at Donner Pass. In late June the Chinese went on strike, demanding higher pay as well as shorter hours and shifts in the dangerous tunnels.³⁹ The Chinese railroad workers in south Vallejo, California, conducted a strike to demand shorter workdays in 1869.⁴⁰ When they could not get a raise, they "demand the [gold] coin," rather than taking "a paper equivalent to their earnings," a demand also made by Chinese men building railroads in Alabama.⁴¹

Occasionally, the Chinese responded with violence, even though such response would put them in greater danger, as a group of Chinese workers of the Northern Pacific Railroad found out in 1882 in Montana. The Deer Lodge-based *New North-West* reported: "A man named Meagher, who had charge of a gang of Chinese workmen on the Northern Pacific, west of Missoula, in some way incurred their enmity a short time since and they murdered him. Some of the dead man's friends

³⁷ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, March 21, 1871.

³⁸ Herman Vandenburg Ames, *The Proposed Amendments to the Constitution of the United States During the First Century of Its History*, which was published as the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, for the year 1896* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897), vol. 2, 237.

³⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nothing Like It in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 340. William Chew, *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad: The Chinese Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad* (Victoria, Canada, 2004), 49.

⁴⁰ "Pacific Slope Brevities," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 17, 1869, 1.

⁴¹ *The New North-West*, November 25, 1870, 1.

banded together, determined on vengeance, and attacked the Chinese, killing six and wounding thirteen. The surviving Chinamen took their trail for Missoula.”⁴²

Historical Erasure

There is a more subtle but more lasting prejudice: the effort to disremember the Chinese in public historical consciousness. Recent scholars have revealed and interpreted what seems to be the deliberate erasure of the Chinese after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad.⁴³ The historical record is similarly censored regarding the Chinese who built other railroads in America. In the case of the Northern Pacific Railroad, during its peak years of construction from 1870 to 1883, the company employed 10,000 Chinese, who accounted for two thirds of the entire labor force of the railroad.⁴⁴ “In the mainstream history books on the NPRR’s construction,” the archeologist Christopher Merritt wrote in 2010, “the Chinese contribution has been largely ignored by scholars and the public.” Merritt notes that this “was an intentional historical omission of the Chinese contributions from the literature in the 1800s, and this attitude has not dramatically changed since.” He also reminds us of the urgency to recover the history of Chinese railroad workers: “The only remnants of the Chinese contribution left today are less than a dozen archaeological sites along the old NPRR grade west of Missoula to Idaho, and of course the grade, rails, and blasted rock faces that are a silent reminder to this forgotten history of thousands.”⁴⁵

The Chinese Workforce throughout North America

Railroad building is an integral part of Chinese American history also because it facilitated the movement of the Chinese from the American West to other parts of the country. The *San Francisco-based Daily Morning Chronicle* reported shortly after the completion of the first transcontinental railroad: “Now that the continent is spanned by the Pacific Railway, the Chinese now are finding themselves eastward in straggling bands to diffuse themselves not only through the towns and cities

⁴² *The New North-West*, July 21, 1882.

⁴³ See A.J. Russell’s famous photograph of the celebration at Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869 as an example. <http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese.html>, <Accessed August 1, 2014>.

⁴⁴ Christopher William Merritt, “‘The Coming Man from Canton’: Chinese Experience in Montana (1862-1943),” Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Montana, 2010, 173.

⁴⁵ Christopher William Merritt, “‘The Coming Man from Canton’: Chinese Experience in Montana (1862-1943),” Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Montana, 2010, 173.

along the railroad but also others hundreds of miles away from the railroad.”⁴⁶ *The Chicago Tribune* made the same prediction: “All hail, John Chinamen! The future coachmen, housemaids and waiting-people of America. They will soon find their way along the line of the Union Pacific Railroad to Chicago, Cincinnati and New York. Thence these enterprising people will spread themselves over the Eastern States, and right glad will a multitude of bankers, farmers and manufacturers be to see them, and have the benefit of their patient labor.”⁴⁷

In the early 1870s, Chinese laundries started to appear in Eastern cities almost simultaneously, such as Philadelphia, Detroit, Providence, and St. Louis. Many of them were established by Chinese from California. In many cities and towns outside the American West, Chinese railroad workers or ex-railroad workers were among the first to arrive. In 1869, the first sizeable group of Chinese -- 250 ex-railroad workers -- arrived in St. Louis, then the fourth largest city in America.⁴⁸

“The Chinese are spreading along the route of the railway, peacefully seeking employment,”⁴⁹ reported the *Chicago Tribune* in 1869. The movement of the Chinese out of the west sometimes was also a result of the active efforts of white employers to import them. Capitalists quickly took advantage of the railroad as a means to bring Chinese immigrant workers to the East. In June 1870 about seventy-five Chinese were brought by the Calvin. T. Sampson to break a strike by the Knights of St. Crispin in his shoe factory in North Adams, Massachusetts. In the early 1870s, a steam factory in Belleville, New Jersey, and a cutlery factory in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, also imported and used Chinese laborers.⁵⁰

The demand for Chinese laborers increased in states outside the West in part because of their performance in building the Transcontinental Railroad. Railroad construction companies in the south of the United States were aware of the reputation of the Chinese as an “unsurpassed class of rough laborers” through “the very faithful and intelligent manner [they] performed their work in constructing Central Pacific Railroad.”⁵¹ As new projects were developed to expand the country’s region rail network, construction companies showed themselves eager to participate in the Chinese

⁴⁶ “The ‘Missouri Republican’ on the Chinese Question,” *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, July 14, 1869, 2.

⁴⁷ “The Chinese,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1869.

⁴⁸ Huping Ling, *Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 26. United States Census Office, *Ninth Census of the United States. Statistics of Population*: (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872).

⁴⁹ “The Labor Strikes and the Chinese,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 2, 1869, 2.

⁵⁰ Roger Daniels, *Asia America: The Chinese and Japanese American Experience since 1850* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1995), 42.

⁵¹ “Chinese Laborers for the Southern States,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1869, 2.

labor at the Chinese labor convention in Memphis in July 1869.⁵² The convention sent an agent to California to explore the possibility of introducing Chinese labor to the South.⁵³ An agent for the St. Louis and Chicago railroad was instructed to help transport 5,000 Chinese laborers to work in the plantations in the South.⁵⁴

Some states started to import Chinese labor shortly thereafter. On December 20, the *New York Times* reported that about three hundred Chinese workers were about to take a Central Pacific train to go to New Orleans under a three-year contract.⁵⁵ No one seemed to want to be left behind in the effort to get hold of this new source of experienced and low cost labor. On July 29, 1870, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported that there would be a meeting about Chinese labor importation at the Chamber of Commerce of the city. “Why should Memphis be behind St. Louis in this movement?” it asked.⁵⁶ The need for labor started the dispersal of the Chinese population, which had concentrated predominantly in the West before the first Transcontinental Railroad. By 1890, about ten percent of Chinese America was found in non-Western states.⁵⁷

There was also considerable opposition to the idea of introducing Chinese workers to the South. In November 1869, the legislature of Tennessee voted to prohibit the “importation” of Chinese labor into the state.⁵⁸ Some expressed their opposition based on religion and anti-capitalist ideology.⁵⁹ Race was clearly a major motivation in such opposition. The *Chicago Tribune* raised questions that were at the heart of the debate over Chinese immigration:

“The completion of the Union Pacific Railroad will undoubtedly have a vast effect on the labor question of the United States. The large immigration now setting in from China to California is attracting the attention of the best thinking minds in the country, and close calculation as to the result upon our population is being made. Are they fit to become

⁵² *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 15, 1869.

⁵³ “The Chinese: Report of the Agent Appointed by the Memphis Convention,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1869, 1.

⁵⁴ *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, June 26, 1869, 3.

⁵⁵ “The Pacific Coast,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1869, 1.

⁵⁶ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 29, 1870.

⁵⁷ United States. Bureau of the Census, *Supplementary Analysis and Derivative Tables: Twelfth Census of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906), 175.

⁵⁸ *The Sunday Morning Appeal*, November 25, 1869. For discussions of the larger context regarding efforts to introduce Chinese labor to the South, see Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), chapter 4 and Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ *Dallas Herald*, July 30, 1870.

*American citizens? Are they civilized? Can they be Americanized? These and other equally important questions are frequently asked by the most intelligent men.*⁶⁰

Even before the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, many Chinese workers started to build railroads elsewhere. The Rev. Augustus W. Loomis reported in March 1869: “how many Chinese have already been employed on railroads not far from San Francisco! They worked on the road to Haywards, on the Napa valley road, and on the road which is to be completed between Sacramento and Stockton. They graded the San Jose and Gilroy road, and on the Vallejo and Sacramento road the call for laborer has been far in advance of the supply. The road in process of construction from Portland, Oregon, towards the south, is employing this kind of labor.”⁶¹

After the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, many Chinese continued to do railroad construction work. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, two “gangs” of Chinese laborers started to build the railroad in Storey County on August 3, 1869.⁶² In November, some 600 Chinese were brought to work on “the California and Oregon Railroad.”⁶³ Railroad building led thousands of Chinese workers to states in the East, Midwest, and South. In the summer of 1869, when the workers building the railroad bridge over the Missouri River at Omaha “quit work on a strike,” for example, the company sent an agent to recruit Chinese workers. People there knew that “there have been several thousand Chinese employed during the last three years on the California end of the Pacific Railroad, and they have been, to a great extent, trained to the American system of labor. These Chinese are a quick-witted, imitative people, and can, under proper foremen, soon become expert workmen in any trade or business.”⁶⁴ In that year, there were also Chinese laborers working on the Virginia and Truckee Railroad.⁶⁵ *The Memphis Daily Appeal* reported in August 1869 that “six or eight hundred Chinese have been engaged to work on the branch of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad, between Jeffersonville and North Vernon, Indiana.”⁶⁶

In 1870 over a thousand Chinese worked in Alabama as railroad workers under a two-year contract.⁶⁷ In 1873, there were three hundred Chinese working along with 16 white men “on the

⁶⁰ “The Chinese,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1869.

⁶¹ Augustus W. Loomis, “How Our Chinamen Are Employed,” *Overland Monthly* 2 (March 1869), 232-33.

⁶² *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 3, 1869, 1.

⁶³ “Pacific Slope Brevities,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 25, 1869, 1.

⁶⁴ “The Labor Strikes and the Chinese,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 2, 1869, 2.

⁶⁵ Chinese Railroad Worker Project at Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/wordpress/timeline/>, <Accessed August 1, 2014>.

⁶⁶ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 5, 1869.

⁶⁷ *The New North-West*, November 25, 1870, 1.

railroad on the Puget Sound section.”⁶⁸ Some 2,600 worked to build the Southern Pacific Railroad in Texas in the 1880s eastward in Texas.⁶⁹

Historical descriptions of Chinese railroad workers often characterized them as living in isolation. A careful examination of their history, however, reveals that their existence was closely connected to larger trends. Their work experiences transformed them from villagers in the agricultural Pearl River Delta to laborers in a rapidly industrializing economy. In this emerging geo-economic order of the trans-Pacific world, China became a major source of labor.

As a consequence, in the next decades Chinese laborers participated in railroad building not only in the United States but also elsewhere, such as Peru and Canada. According to the inscription on the monument to commemorate Chinese railroad workers in Canada, “between 1880 and 1885 more than 17,000 Chinese laborers from Guangdong Province of China had participated in the construction of the most dangerous western section of the railroad through the Canadian Rocky Mountains.”⁷⁰

The U.S. government signed the Burlingame Treaty (1868) with China in an effort to bring China labor to American shores. Various agents and organizations appeared to satisfy the need for Chinese labor in different parts of the country. One of the individuals who played an important role in bringing Chinese laborers to work on railroads and elsewhere in the South was Cornelius Koopmanschap. An Amsterdam-born immigrant, Koopmanschap had spent much time in Hong Kong, where he started a corporation named Koopmanschap & Bosman Co. in 1859, which was renamed Koopmanschap & Co. in 1862.⁷¹ The company ran ships, transporting passengers and goods between California and Kong Hong. In 1875 it ran an ad in the bilingual newspaper, *California China Mail and Flying Dragon* for its Black Ball Clipper Line, which had “ships sailing regularly” between “San Francisco and Hong Kong.”⁷² A Chinese-labor recruitment agency, Donuho, Joy & Co., published an ad for “CHINESE LABOR” in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, stating: “We are now prepared, in connection with the Memphis and Charleston railroad company, to receive and execute orders for Chinese labor, on long time contracts.”⁷³

⁶⁸ *Avant Courier*, May 23, 1873.

⁶⁹ Mary Dodson Wade, *People of Texas* (Chicago: Heinemann, 2008).

⁷⁰ Huang Annian, comp. and ed., *The Silent Spikes: Chinese Laborers and the Construction of North American Railroads*, trans. Zhang Juguo, (Beijing: Wuzhou Communications, 2006), 145.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Sinn, *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 116.

⁷² *California China Mail and Flying Dragon*, January 1, 1867.

⁷³ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 26, 1870.

White employers made active efforts in recruiting Chinese laborers. As early as January 1867, the bilingual Chinese-English newspaper *California China Mail and Flying Dragon* published a long article for its Chinese readers an apparent effort to entice the Chinese to go to work in the south of the United States. The article discusses “the place in the United States that produces white sugar, rice, and cotton.” This place “has the most difficulty in finding workers and wanted to hire Chinese laborers,” the newspaper noted. The report also mentioned a Southern agent, who went to San Francisco and took a Chinese man named Li Yu to the South to observe the climate and customs there firsthand so that the Chinese would feel comfortable about the place. Li reportedly returned to San Francisco “very pleased.”⁷⁴

In March the same newspaper reported in detail the Central Pacific Railroad’s need for labor: “Last year, the company hired 11,000 workers” and had plans to hire 10,000 more. It also mentioned that there were also opportunities in farming. Those working on farms could earn between \$20-30; Railroad workers could make \$30.⁷⁵

The experiences of Chinese railroad workers thus represented an integral part of a larger story of Chinese immigrants fulfilling the need for labor of America’s expanding capitalist economy. Nineteenth-century American public opinion makers knew this only too well. On September 26, 1869, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* published a long article, entitled “The Chinaman,” and its purpose was to explain “What He is – His Value to the South.” The article noted the occupations in which the Chinese had already become prominent: “Used to be patient and enduring, he makes the best cook and house servant, never demanding above half the wages commonly paid to white servants for similar service. Laborious, strong and steady, he is not to be beaten as a farm laborer, ditcher or railroad hand.” The article also noted that the Chinese were only wanted for those occupations: “We want men to plow, sow and reap; to make corn, cotton, rice, sugar and tobacco; we are not looking for editors, poets, orators, statesmen, painters, sculptors, architects and engineers.”⁷⁶

We thus can see that the Chinese were in demand because they met the need of a radicalized labor market for cheap and efficient workers in the post-Civil War era. The argument about the need for Chinese made by white observers was invariably “one of temporary necessity, of individual profit, of cheap labor and present convenience.”⁷⁷ Noting that it was not yet time to stop Chinese immigration, the *Chicago Tribune* reminded its readers that the country still needed the Chinese: “The best and cheapest laborers that come to our shores are from China. As farmers they are very good, as servants, they are better than the best blacks, and as miners superior too all others. When all

⁷⁴ *California China Mail and Flying Dragon*, January 1, 1867.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, March 1, 1867.

⁷⁶ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 26, 1869.

⁷⁷ *The New North West*, December 17, 1875.

our country shall have been thoroughly prospected, and ten thousand gold and silver mines opened; when all our public lands shall have been reduced to cultivation; when railroads are built everywhere over the continent, and our houses have good servants, will it be time to talk about stopping Chinese immigration.”⁷⁸ In a racialized job market, the Chinese immigrant earned public accolades as “a born railroad builder” and as “an ideal servant.”⁷⁹

A Glimpse into the Dietary Habits of Chinese Railroad Workers

In order to comprehend the history of Chinese railroad workers on their own terms and their historical agency, we must examine their life experience. Gathering evidence of what they ate and drank can shed light on their sense of identity and help us understand their networks that helped them stay connected while laboring in distant and often isolated railroad construction sites.

Evidence shows clearly that Chinese railroad workers maintained their traditional diet. Although they were often characterized by the media as living on vegetables and rice, they also enjoyed meat. The *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported in 1871: “They live mostly on fresh meat and rice, and are particularly fond of chickens.”⁸⁰ Details of their diet reflect traditional Cantonese cuisine. The Central Pacific management provided Chinese food stuffs: “dried oysters, dried cuttle fish, dried fish, sweet rice, crackers, dried bamboo, salted cabbage, Chinese sugar, dried fruits and vegetables, vermicelli, dried seaweed, Chinese bacon, dried abalone, dried mushrooms, peanut oil, tea, rice, pork, and poultry.”⁸¹ Railroad companies were keenly aware of Chinese workers’ desire for Chinese food. When about three hundred Chinese laborers were brought to build railroad in Texas in December 1869 on a special train, one of the cars had “cooking arrangements suited to their needs.”⁸² Even though they often lived in tents, they still carried utensils for cooking and consuming Chinese food.⁸³

Archeological findings from camps sites on the Central Pacific Railroad include remnants of rice bowls as well as teapots.⁸⁴ Chinese laborers drank tea not only in their camps but also at work. Tea

⁷⁸ “The Chinese,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1869.

⁷⁹ “The Chinaman as a Railroad Builder,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1869, 1. Arnold Genthe, *Pictures of Old Chinatown*, with text by Will Irwin (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1909), 7.

⁸⁰ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, March 21, 1871.

⁸¹ Thomas W. Chinn, Editor; H. Mark Lai, Philip P. Choy, Associate Editors, *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969), 44.

⁸² *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 31, 1869.

⁸³ *The New North-West*, November 25, 1870, 1.

⁸⁴ Michael R. Polk, et al., comp., “From Lampo Junction to Rozel: The Archaeological History of the Transcontinental Railroad across the Promontory Mountains, Utah,” Golden Spike National Historic Site SYNTHESIS REPORT (April 5,

was delivered to them by “youngsters who carried pails on a sturdy pole across their shoulders.”⁸⁵ Each group of Chinese railroad workers had their own cook, who drew upon the group’s “treasury to buy provisions through Chinese merchants in Sacramento and San Francisco.”⁸⁶

The Chinese workers’ traditional diet helped them to remain “in remarkable health.” Consistent with the Cantonese culinary tradition, they had a diverse and varied menu. John Hoyt Williams cites a list that he claims was often repeated: “The Chinese menu included dried oysters, abalone and cuttlefish, dried bamboo sprouts and mushrooms, five kinds of vegetables, pork, poultry, vermicelli, rice, salted cabbage, dried seaweed, sweet-rice, crackers, sugar, four kinds of dried fruit, Chinese bacon, peanut oil and tea.’ Rounding out the menu were various beans, salted fish, dried shrimp, peas, and ‘small articles for Chinese chow chow’.”⁸⁷ These constituted a much more varied and healthy diet than that of the white workers, whose food consisted mainly of “beef, beans, bread, butter, and potatoes.”⁸⁸ Perhaps more important was the water that the Chinese used. While white workers quenched their thirst with water from the nearby streams, lakes, or rivers, the Chinese were thought to always drink tea. Chinese cooks boiled water not just to make tea but also to provide for the Chinese workers to take hot baths after their work was done.⁸⁹

Chinese railroad workers’ distinctive food not only signaled their cultural identity but also increased awareness of Chinese food in America. They brought Chinese food to remote areas seldom reached by their compatriots engaged in other occupations. The diet of the Chinese drew increasing attention from non-Chinese observers. In 1867 Albert Deane Richardson wrote about the Chinese he saw during his excursions to the West: “At several dining-camps we saw hundreds sitting on the ground, eating soft boiled rice with chop-sticks as fast as terrestrials could with soup-ladles.”⁹⁰ In September 1869, Prentice Mulford traveled on the Western Pacific Railroad from San Francisco to Sacramento. When he reached Amador Valley, a plain in the Diablo Range, he saw “moss grown groves, streams

2012), 151. Also see “Pottery Relics Used in 19th Century Central Pacific Railroad Chinese Worker Camps,” Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum , http://cpr.org/Museum/Ephemera/CPRR_Chinese_Pottery.html, <accessed August 5, 2014).

⁸⁵ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nothing Like It In the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 162.

⁸⁶ John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, a division of Random House, 1988), 157.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸⁸ George Kraus, “Chinese Laborers and the Construction of the Central Pacific,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 37:1 (1969): 46.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁰ Albert Deane Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi: From the Great River to the Great Ocean. Life and Adventure on the Prairies, Mountains, and Pacific Coast* (Hartford, Connecticut: American Publishing Company, 1867), 462.

of water.” He also noticed “a camp of Chinese; bowls of rice and chopsticks in hand, taking their dinner by the roadside.”⁹¹ Chinese railroad workers clung to their gastronomical traditions not simply because it was a matter of habit. Food possessed profound cultural significance for the Chinese. When a railroad worker passed away in Alabama in 1870, “his remains were buried by his comrades, coffined, in a shallow grave, with a candle and matches, a bowl of cooked and a bag of raw rice, and a pair of chop-sticks.”⁹² His fellow countrymen wanted him to be able to eat Chinese food and be Chinese after his departure from this world.

In areas, where there was a Chinese community, Chinese restaurants appeared to serve the railroad workers and Chinese in other lines of work. One such area was Hanford, California, where the restaurant started by Shu Wing Gong (the grandfather of Richard Wing, a legendary twentieth-century Chinese restaurateur). It originally served Chinese food to Chinese customers. But when Chinese railroad workers and farmhands left, it became a chop suey house, catering to the taste of non-Chinese patrons.

Tracing the flow of the food of Chinese railroad workers sheds light on the networks of commerce, culture, and immigration that connected them with larger Chinese communities in major cities such as Sacramento and San Francisco, as well as Hong Kong and Canton. Such networks help us understand the community and history that these workers shared with their compatriots in the rest of the country and in China.

The cook drew upon the railroad worker group’s collective savings to buy food and other supplies through Chinese merchants in cities like San Francisco.⁹³ Sometimes, there was a store nearby to provide the food supplies. For the seven hundred or so Chinese building a railroad near the San Joaquin River in 1873, for example, “there was a store kept in several cars near the end of the track” which had a variety of Chinese foods like dried oysters, sweet rice crackers, dried bamboo sprouts, salted cabbage, Chinese sugar, and Chinese bacon. Perhaps a factor explaining why the Chinese workers adhered to their traditional diet, their food had far greater variety than “the beef, beans, bread-and-butter, and potatoes of the white laborers.”⁹⁴ *The Dallas Herald* reported that Chinese

⁹¹ Prentice Mulford, “The Last Link: From San Francisco to Sacramento over the Western Pacific Railroad,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 14, 1869, 1.

⁹² *The New North West*, November 25, 1870, 1.

⁹³ John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, a division of Random House, 1988), 157.

⁹⁴ Charles Nordhoff, *California: For Health, Pleasure and Residence, A Book for Travellers and Settlers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1873), 190.

workers would soon arrive in Calvert, Texas, “for work on the Pacific road.” It also mentioned that “following them will be a store with Chinese foods.”⁹⁵

The *Memphis Daily Appeal* enumerated the “goods bought for Chinese store,”⁹⁶ most of which are food and food-related items:

<i>“Narrow leaves, 500 pounds.</i>	<i>1 pound Chinese ink.</i>
<i>Bamboo brushes, 5 dozen.</i>	<i>100 Chinese pens.</i>
<i>Foo Chuck, or bean curd sticks, 10 boxes.</i>	<i>10 paper boxes pills.</i>
<i>10 boxes vermicelli, 500 pounds.</i>	<i>10 bottles medicine powder.</i>
<i>200 pounds ginger root.</i>	<i>10 boxes (100 gallons) China nut oil.</i>
<i>50 pounds orange peel.</i>	<i>10 jars or 700 pounds salt turnip.</i>
<i>200 pounds cuttle fish.</i>	<i>40 sets bowls.</i>
<i>10 boxes soy.</i>	<i>40 sets chop sticks.</i>
<i>10 jars ketchup.</i>	<i>1 dozen chop knives.</i>
<i>20 reams Chinese writing paper.</i>	<i>2000 pounds salt shrimps.</i>
<i>200 Chinese pencils.</i>	<i>15 bags or 1950 pounds salt fish.</i>
<i>10 daily account books.</i>	<i>20u bags fungus.</i>
<i>5000 Chinese visiting card paper.</i>	<i>50 Chinese pass [?] books.</i>
<i>5 pieces paper (for lights).</i>	<i>50 Chinese general ledger books.</i>
<i>300 pounds California abalones.</i>	<i>6 boxes or 60,000 fire-crackers.</i>
<i>40 pounds red melon seeds.</i>	<i>2 boxes fire-crackers</i>
<i>2 dozen frying pan shovels.</i>	<i>Jos paper.</i>
<i>4 dozen copper spoons (large).</i>	<i>Jos sticks.</i>
<i>100 pounds pak ko.</i>	<i>1 box or 55 pounds dried oysters.</i>
<i>10 pairs crape suspenders.</i>	<i>5 mats or 250 pounds black peas.</i>
<i>all pounds sugar candy.</i>	<i>2 mats or 100 pounds red peas.</i>
<i>50 pounds red dates.</i>	<i>5 mats or 250 barrels green peas.</i>
<i>6 counting boards.</i>	<i>18 large kettles.</i>
	<i>10 small kettles.</i>

⁹⁵ *Dallas Herald*, January 15, 1870. 1.

⁹⁶ *The Memphis Daily Appeal*. December 31, 1869.

2 boxes or 120 pairs Chinese common shoes.

20 Chinese purses.

10 buckskin purses.

GOODS FOR CHINESE NEW YEAR

1 box or 30 pounds preserved dates.

30 pounds preserved limes.

30 pounds preserved mellons.

30 pounds preserved kirn quat, or limes.

13 pounds betel nuts, etc.

75 pounds olives, salted.

75 pounds olives, preserved.

75 pounds mango, preserved.

66 pounds crambolo [caramabolo?], preserved.

55 pounds lamp-wicks

10,000 Chinese cigars.

50 Chinese combs.

50 bottles peppermint oil.

5 pounds dried mellons.

300 pieces cha chay, for washing use.

50 pieces queue strings, silk thread.”

Of the sixty-six items, forty-nine of them are food or food-related items. Similarly, the list includes sixteen items that are clearly marked as “goods for Chinese New Year,” the most significant holiday for the Chinese. Among them, twelve are food and food-related items. The prominence of food in these two lists underscores its importance in the lives of Chinese railroad workers laboring in remote areas.

A prominent marker of their identity, Chinese food helped such mobile Chinese laborers remain connected to Chinese culture. Such connections were desired and consciously maintained by the Chinese. In the above case and other instances, Chinese foods were made available as a direct result of the negotiations between the company and Chinese community leaders in San Francisco, who represented about three hundred former Central Pacific Railroad workers. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese railroad workers continuously maintained ties to urban Chinatowns, which they associated with “food towns.”⁹⁷

Of particular importance is the Chinatown in San Francisco, which stood not only as the largest supply center in Chinese America throughout the nineteenth century but also as an important labor recruitment center for railroad companies and other enterprises interested in hiring Chinese workers. It was also Chinese America’s food capital. As early as 1856, there were thirty-three grocery stores, five restaurants, and five meat stores in Chinatown.⁹⁸

San Francisco’s Chinatown remained for a long time the most important port for immigration and for international commerce between China and America. As a food wholesale center, it connected China and Chinese Americans, including Chinese railroad workers, living in other parts of the United States. The main Chinese-language newspaper, *The Oriental*, often listed food wholesale prices in the front page in the 1870s. On October 23, 1875, for example, it displayed the per-hundred-pound price for more than twenty different kinds of foods, including rice, *muer* (dried fungus), sugar, ham, eggs, and beans.⁹⁹ Some of those foods were imported from China. The newspaper also published train schedules for trains going between San Francisco and cities like Sacramento and Stockton, sometimes on the front page, showing the importance of Chinatown as a transportation hub within Chinese America.¹⁰⁰ Evidently, in order to fully comprehend the experience of Chinese railroad

⁹⁷ “‘Food Town’: Chinatown and the American Journey of Chinese Food,” in Vanessa Kuennemann and Ruth Mayer, eds., *Chinatowns in a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 182-197.

⁹⁸ Yong Chen, *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), chapter 4.

⁹⁹ *The Oriental*, October 23, 1875.

¹⁰⁰ See for example *The Oriental*, September 25, 1875.

workers, we must also understand the chain of commerce and culture that connected them to Chinese culture and to their compatriots in communities in America and China.

In short, recovering the long-forgotten experiences of Chinese railroad workers help us better understand the contributions of Chinese Americans to the development of the United States. Their stories constitute an extremely important chapter in both Chinese American and U.S. history. The exploitation and discrimination that they encountered mirrored the experiences of their Chinese compatriots working in other occupations, revealing the racial hierarchy of America's labor market. In our efforts to recover the history of Chinese railroad workers from their own perspective, their dietary preferences, in particular, sheds light on their daily life and historical agency, and on how interconnected historical forces in commerce, immigration, and culture shaped their experiences and identity. Food imported from China to Chinatowns in large cities, and from those cities to remote sites where Chinese worked in railroad construction and other jobs helped Chinese workers in far-flung locations maintain and sustain a conscious sense of community and identity that connected them both to China and to each other.

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