

Chinese railroad workers finally getting recognition

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Quick Notes:

- The Transcontinental Railroad was completed on May 10, 1869, after the eastern and western portions of the track met at Promontory, Utah.
- This completed project entailed 1,912 miles of track, the brunt of which was completed by Chinese migrant railroad workers (for *very* low pay).
- Despite being largely left out of historical texts, now, these workers are now receiving their due credit.

This week marks 150 years since the meeting of the transcontinental railroad tracks, a feat that would not have been possible were it not for the labor of Chinese immigrants.

Over the last 150 years, Chinese workers have been ignored by history, but that is no longer the case. A revolutionary multi-disciplined academic project is examining the lives of these Chinese workers with the aim of wholly and finally telling their stories.

Why the change of heart?

Gordon Chang, now an Olive H. Palmer Professor of Humanities, along with co-director Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Joseph S. Atha Professor of Humanities, both hope to change that.

Together they oversee the Chinese Railroad Workers Project through Stanford University. The project aims to “produce a new analysis of how Chinese workers contributed to shaping the physical and social landscapes of the American West.”

This project has produced extensive scholarship based on new materials and careful studying of the Chinese railroad worker experience in early America.

Because the history of the Chinese in the US during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is transnational, it deserves to be told from both the Chinese and US perspectives.

An international team of scholars is helping lead the charge for new research and robust, thorough publications.

Overlooked throughout history

The focus of the Chinese Railroad Workers Project is on the workers, but the Project also includes research on the lives they might have led following the completion of the railroad.

Historical accounts of the railroads in America focus on the corporations and their presidents and not on the labor force who built the tracks.

Written history has largely marginalized the Chinese workers for their efforts and contributions to the American railway system.

During its construction, more than ten thousand workers were recruited from China to help connect the Central Pacific Railroad to Promontory Point, Utah.

The almost 650 miles of track that the Chinese workers laid connected the Central Pacific Railroad with the Union Pacific.

Their labor brought about the first direct east-west route in the country called the Transcontinental Railroad and made it possible to cross the continent by rail.

At the time, it was considered the most progressive engineering feat of its kind.



Chinese camp and construction train in Nevada when the building of the first transcontinental railroad was being speeded across the state by the Central Pacific. Because of a shortage of labor on the Pacific Coast, about 10,000 Chinese were brought in to do the work. (Getty Images).

Chinese workers were recruited to do everything from unskilled labor to highly technical blacksmithing, tunneling, and carpentry work.

Workers relied on hand tools to complete most of the work, which was intense and backbreaking. However, Chinese workers hardly compensated fairly.

Money for nothing

Working six days a week, most Chinese workers earned just \$26 a month in 1864. That is \$424.87 in today's currency.

Chinese workers received far less compensation than other groups working on the railroad.

“Chinese workers received 30-50% lower wages than whites for the same exact jobs. They also had the most difficult and dangerous work,” co-director Chang said.

The time it took migrant workers to travel from Hong Kong and China was as long as it took workers to travel from the eastern seaboard of the United States.

Most of the laborers on the eastern side of the tracks were Irish. They were unable to make the journey because it took months to reach California, and the need for a workforce was immediate.

Labor contractors recruited the Chinese labor force from the Guangdong (Canton) province. Targeted counties were those that suffered from abject poverty and ongoing pervasive civil unrest.

Desperate for work, these Chinese immigrants boarded ships out of Hong Kong. Some would eventually land in Peru and Cuba, doing manual labor in mines.

Mr. Stanford will see you now

Back in 1869, the president of the Central Pacific, Leland Stanford, drove a ceremonial golden spike at the end of the line to commemorate the occasion. The golden spike was made of 17.6 karat gold and was a gift from David Hewes, a San Francisco contractor.

During the ceremony, Stanford took a swing at the spike but accidentally struck the tie instead.

Ultimately, a railroad worker drove the final spike at 12:47 p.m. on May 10, 1869. The likelihood that the worker was Chinese is great.

Although Stanford and his colleagues received all the credit, the Chinese workers were the driving force behind the working groups of laborers.



The driving of the Golden Spike, joining the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads to complete the first transcontinental railroad across the United States, May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory; screen Print, circa 1935. (Photo by GraphicaArtis/Getty Images)

“Without the Chinese migrants, the transcontinental railroad would not have been possible,” Chang added.

During the earliest days of the American railroad, many companies were reluctant to hire Chinese workers. When job ads for workers went unnoticed by the majority white population, however, Central Pacific director Charles Crocker recommended hiring Chinese workers.

Crocker’s plan was met with staunch opposition. California was already in the grips of discrimination against Chinese, due in part to the California Gold Rush.

Nevertheless, the railroad companies were desperate for workers.

“Crocker’s colleagues objected at first because of the prejudice but then relented as they had few other options,” Chang said.

The Central Pacific project started with a crew of 21 workers in January 1864. As the Chinese workers continued to prove themselves capable, the labor force grew. The demand for labor continued to increase, and other majority populations were reluctant to do the work.

In 1865, Stanford told Congress that the majority of the labor force were Chinese, noting that, “Without them, it would be impossible to complete the western portion of this great national enterprise.”

Two years into the project, more than 90% of the workforce was Chinese. While this was common knowledge at the time, the reality is that contributions of the Chinese workers are lost to history.

Too little, too late?

As the Chinese contribution continued to fade from the history books, politicians continued to laud the accomplishments of everyone but them for their railroad contributions.

During the 100th anniversary of the railroad, John Volpe, transportation secretary for Richard Nixon, gave a keynote address.

“Who else but Americans could drill ten tunnels in the mountains with 30 feet deep in snow?” Volpe asked the crowd. “Who else but Americans could have laid 10 miles of track in twelve hours?”

Americans were not the ones doing this work — it was the Chinese. If ever there were an opportunity for recognition, it would have been at that moment.

The labor force helped to create what is now called the American Century for its innovation and progressive technological advancements. Yet, the Chinese were later forbidden to become US citizens.

Manifest Destiny

The impact of the railroad in the United States is immense. So too is the effect that the labor had on Chinese families in the west.

For generations, railroad work has been a point of pride in the Chinese American community, even though the annals of history ignored it. The names of the majority of the workers have been lost, as have their sacrifices and specific contributions.

Chinese workers were involved in the construction of American rail systems long before 1863 when construction on the western portion of the railways began. Records about Chinese workers are incomplete and inexact, but through careful scholarship, it is possible these workers can finally receive the full accolades they so wholly deserve.

The Transcontinental Railroad made it possible to travel the country in a matter of days, not months. It paved the way for new settlers to venture west and ultimately shaped the nation.

This ultimately helped prepare America for its introduction to the world of global politics.

Because of its vast importance, it is critical that history books finally acknowledge the genuine effort and contributions of Chinese workers.

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