



COLUMN MICHAEL HILTZIK BUSINESS

Chinese immigrants helped build California, but they've been written out of its history

By MICHAEL HILTZIK
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Chinese immigrant work crews prepare to excavate a snow-covered portion of the Central Pacific Railroad's route in the Sierras. (Stanford University)

In 2014, the U.S. Labor Department formally inducted the Chinese workers

who helped build the transcontinental railroad into its Hall of Honor, giving them a place in American labor history alongside union leaders such as Eugene V. Debs and A. Philip Randolph and champions of worker dignity such as Mother Jones and Cesar Chavez.

What was remarkable about that moment was that it took the nation 145 years to recognize Chinese immigrants' role in building the nation.



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From 1865 to 1869, as many as 20,000 Chinese laborers worked on the Central Pacific Railroad, which ran from Sacramento to Promontory Summit, Utah, where it was united with the Union Pacific Railroad in the golden spike ceremony marking the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. Those workers accounted for as much as 90% of the Central Pacific workforce.

The Central Pacific could not have been built without them — and without the Central Pacific, the history of the American West and California in particular might have been very different. That's a fact to be considered as the 150th anniversary of the golden spike ceremony looms just a month away, and as immigration again roils American politics.

Chinese workers were acknowledged as ubiquitous and indispensable, but they were accorded no voice.... We cannot hear what they said, thought, or felt.

— GORDON H. CHANG, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

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For the experience of the immigrant Chinese workers in America bears lessons for us today: Their importance in building the nation, the West and California is incontestable, yet has been obscured by racism and xenophobia that made it easy for subsequent generations to forget their role. They were low-paid laborers, denied a path to citizenship, victimized by violent reaction, yet without them America would be a different and a poorer place.

As Stanford historian Gordon H. Chang writes in his forthcoming book “Ghosts of Gold Mountain,” these workers have been rendered “all but invisible.... In fact, in some instances Chinese are written out of the story altogether.”

Chang began a concerted effort to redress the balance in 2012, when he and his Stanford colleague Shelley Fisher Fishkin organized the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford and put out a call for documents, including family papers, here and in China.

The prospects were not auspicious. “Through the years, with other colleagues, I tried to locate documentary material, but never with success,” Chang, a fourth-generation Californian, told me. “So I knew the chances of unearthing something that no one had found before were slim.” But there were

“tantalizing leads,” he says — a mention by another historian of a taped interview with a railroad worker in the 1930s, for instance. “But we looked for the tape and couldn’t find it.”

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In 2012, he and his colleagues began a systematic search of repositories around the country, identified descendants of railroad workers whose families might have documentary material, and reached out to colleagues in China,

especially in Guangdong (Canton), the region northwest of Hong Kong from which the railroad workers came.

Indeed, the dearth of material was bewildering. Many of the workers were literate; tens of thousands of letters were known to have crossed the Pacific in the mid- to late 19th century, according to records of the Pacific Mail Steamship Co. “Yet, remarkably, not a single message from or to a Railroad Chinese in this vigorous traffic has been located,” Chang writes. He blames “arson, pillaging, and the willful destruction of Chinese belongings by hostile 19th century mobs in America,” as well as political upheavals in China and events such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

Bit by bit, however, a picture emerged. There were Chinese-language material in the U.S. and China that had not been consulted before, archeological artifacts from the railroad route that revealed much about the Chinese workers’ daily lives, poetry and folk songs that told more about the workers’ hopes, fears and feelings, and family lore handed down through the generations as oral legacies.

Then there was the context of their employment, skated over by historians with little interest in the Chinese immigrant experience. In public, Chinese immigrants were denigrated as interlopers by political leaders.

Among the latter were Leland Stanford, California’s first Republican governor and the president of the Central Pacific. In his inaugural address as governor in 1862, Stanford disdained “the settlement among us of an inferior race ... a degraded and distinct people” exercising “a deleterious influence upon the superior race.” Yet Stanford employed numerous Chinese workers at his home, some of whom were treated as almost family, and even brought a daughter suffering a serious infection to a Chinese healer, who brought her back to

health after Western medicine had failed.

When railroad construction began, Charles Crocker had to fight a battle with Stanford and his other partners to hire Chinese laborers, even though white European laborers were so scarce that the progress of the railroad was in question.

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As Chang relates, James Strobridge, the fearsome, eye-patched field superintendent, declared, “I will not boss Chinese.” He was overruled by

Crocker with the words, “Did they not build the Chinese wall, the biggest piece of masonry in the world?”

Strobridge found his workers at first in Auburn, a community in the Sierra foothills with a large Chinese population dating from the gold rush. There he met a Chinese labor contractor identified as Hung Wah — almost certainly not his real name, for it translates as “working together harmoniously” and might refer to his position as a labor agent, Chang writes. Chang mined payroll and census records to assemble a glimpse of Hung Wah’s life — emigration to the U.S. in 1850 at perhaps 19, occupied initially as a miner but with an entrepreneurial streak that made him a valued intermediary between the Chinese workers and the railroad bosses.

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The Chinese workers showed their worth quickly. They took on the lowliest and most dangerous tasks, were paid 30% less than their white co-workers — the whites received higher pay and board, the Chinese lower pay and no board — and were banned from managerial roles on the project. They were effective and disciplined workers, not given to drinking or carousing, and complaisant — until June 24, 1867, when the entire Chinese workforce stopped work,

demanding pay parity with white workers.

The standoff lasted eight days, broken by a cutoff of goods and food by the company (or possibly the Chinese labor contractors), and the company's hard-nosed refusal to negotiate. Eventually, Chang reports, the company quietly raised the Chinese workers' pay, though not to parity.

Chang's work fills in many of the blanks left by standard histories of the transcontinental railroad by Stephen Ambrose and David Howard Bain. Both mention the role of the Chinese laborers — how could they not? — but fail to give them an individual voice.

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Bain's accounts of the golden spike celebration at Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869, for example, mentions that Strobridge introduced his Chinese foreman to the celebrants, without identifying Hung Wah by name.

Chang names three of the other workers likely to have been introduced that day, but observes that news accounts of the ceremony don't mention whether the Chinese workers even spoke. This was and remains typical of their treatment in history. "Chinese workers were acknowledged as ubiquitous and

indispensable,” Chang writes, “but they were accorded no voice.... We cannot hear what they said, thought or felt. They were ‘silent spikes’ or ‘nameless builders.’ ”

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MAR 22, 2019 | 11:15 AM

The most dispiriting part of the story of the Chinese railroad workers is their treatment after the railroad’s completion, when they were subjected to racial discrimination and violence.

“The 1870s and 1880s were a time of political reaction throughout the

country,” Chang says. “The turning away from Reconstruction meant the resurrection of Confederate racial attitudes.” The Chinese, he adds, were “radically different racially, culturally, and in terms of the work style from Europeans.”

A depression that started in 1873 added economic conflict to the mix. The racist pandering in which Stanford engaged in 1862 found a ready audience. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese immigrants from entering the United States, Chinese resident aliens from citizenship and Chinese workers from working on government projects; in 1931 the companies building Hoover Dam were forbidden by their government contracts to employ “Mongolian [i.e., Chinese] labor.” That raised few objections from labor organizations of the time, which were anxious to preserve job opportunities for their own, typically Caucasian, members.

The Chinese Exclusion Act wasn’t repealed until 1943, when Congress recognized that such official discrimination gave the Japanese enemy a wedge to drive between the U.S. and its nationalist Chinese allies. Even then, visas were limited to 105 a year.

Chang writes that the railroad descendants’ family accounts echo with “a varying mixture of pride, anguish, celebration, and resentment.” Many see their ancestors’ labor on the railroad as “the purchase of, and the irrefutable claim to, American place and identity.”

But that’s weighed against “the ignorance and prejudice that demeaned the Railroad Chinese,” who “despite their sacrifice ... were tossed aside after the railroad work was done, their stories marginalized or omitted from the histories that followed.”

In 1969, at a ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of the golden

spike, then-Transportation Secretary John Volpe infuriated Chinese Americans in the audience by declaring, “Who else but Americans could drill ten tunnels in mountains 30 feet deep in snow? ... Who else but Americans could have laid ten miles of track in 12 hours?”

Some 45 years after that, the Labor Department recognized the contributions of the railroad workers, and one year later, when President Obama welcomed Chinese President Xi Jinping to the White House, he observed that “Chinese immigrants helped build our railroads and our great cities.”

Now, Chang says, “We may be at a turning point of Chinese Americans confronting the past and demanding a change.” The 150th anniversary of the golden spike ceremony beckons a month from now, marking an ideal opportunity to bring the workers who made it happen out of history’s shadows.

Michael Hiltzik



Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Michael Hiltzik writes a daily blog appearing on latimes.com. His business column appears in print every Sunday, and occasionally on other days. As a member of the Los Angeles Times staff, he has been a financial and technology writer and a foreign correspondent. He is the author of six books, including “Dealers of Lightning: Xerox PARC and the Dawn of the Computer Age” and “The New Deal: A Modern History.” Hiltzik and colleague Chuck Philips shared the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for articles exposing corruption in the entertainment industry.

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