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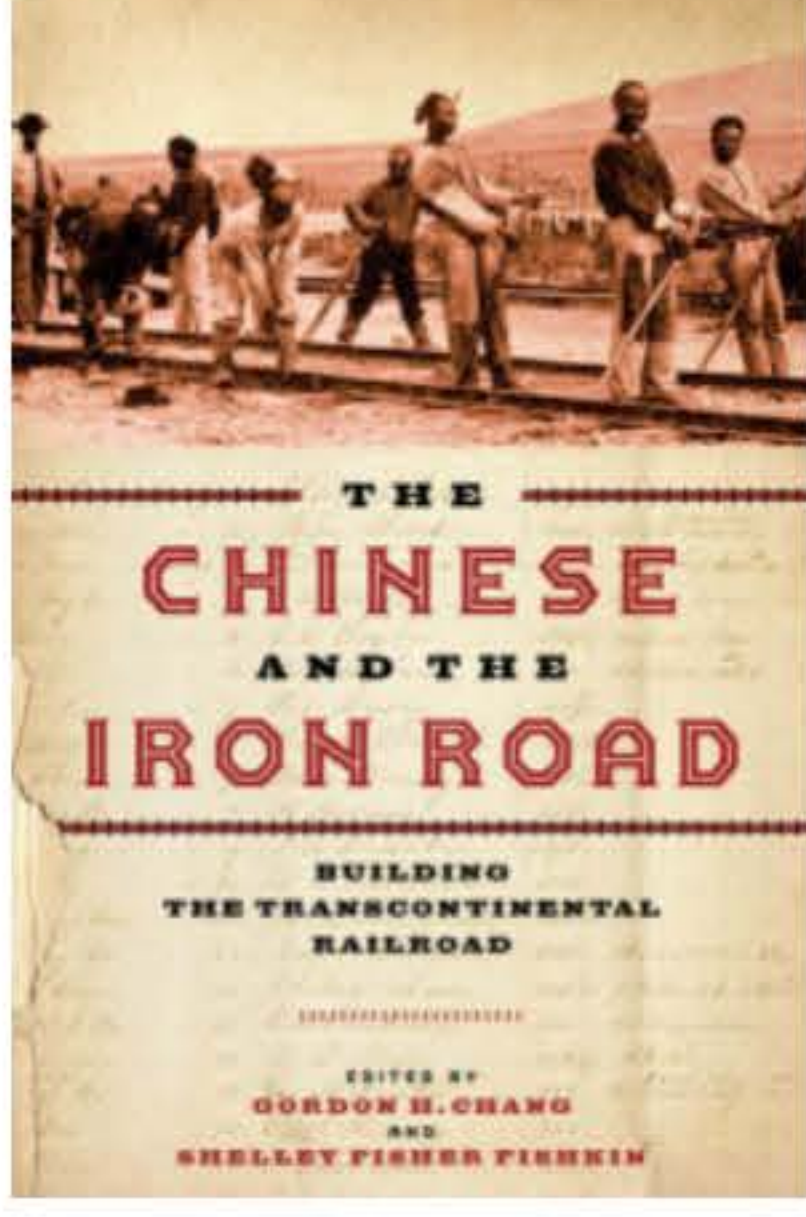
Rethinking the Benefits Brought by the Chinese Railroad Workers

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Title: 227 East and West shaking hand at Laying Last Rail. This [work](#) (by Andrew J. Russell), identified by [Oakland Museum of California](#), is free of known copyright restrictions.

Today's news is filled with anxiety about migration. In the U.S., policy makers and analysts, scholars and journalists alike characterize the flow of immigration as a crisis, and frame migrants as a threat to the national economy, social cohesion and cultural tradition. [The Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford](#) has tested such assumptions by unveiling our best evidence of one of the most momentous flows of migrants into the U.S. Our project's network of scholars found that during the second half of the nineteenth century, thousands upon thousands of Chinese crossed the Pacific to work on building the Central Pacific Railroad. Despite their contributions, the Chinese were subject to overt and devastating racial animus. Then, as now, political leaders gained support by amplifying unfounded assertions that migrants – in this case Chinese – were responsible for the loss of jobs for native-born whites. As the anger heated against the migrants, in the nineteenth century as now the accusations and campaigns to drive out the migrants were relatively impervious to appeals to facts.



The Chinese and the Iron Road shines new light on the Chinese railroad workers and their place in cultural memory.

Today, to correct the record, we have accomplished what has to this point eluded previous research – we have achieved an exhaustive search and analysis of the historical evidence. Among our many publications, our interpretation of record is presented in the book, *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*. In this book we conclusively demonstrate that while the Chinese migrant laborers were accused of impoverishing the economy, diluting nationality, and defiling Caucasian culture, in fact they contributed mightily to the creation of wealth, and their achievement enabled national cohesion, and cultural continuity across the North American continent.

From 1864 to 1869, upward of fifteen to twenty thousand individuals – mostly men – crossed the Pacific Ocean from China to enter America. In the span of five years, and throughout the period of the U.S. Civil War, these Chinese men responded to the call for workers for the massive construction campaign to build the Transcontinental Railroad. The U.S. government granted payments in advance to fund this railroad project to connect the Atlantic and Pacific coasts with what seemed impossible – a modern, comparatively rapid transcontinental rail line. The dream was to cut the time needed to cross the continent from weeks to a matter of days.

In this respect much was at stake politically and economically to complete the rail line, and the government contracted out the work to the private Central Pacific and Union Pacific Rail companies. The private companies increasingly enlarged their estimates of how large a labor force they needed to complete the work, and indeed began with a declared preference to hire white residents of the United States. For the case of the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR), within a short distance from the start eastward from Sacramento, and after the first winter that they encountered during heavy construction, many white workers quit to return to relatively less life-threatening work such as mining. Through a series of business decisions – some taken with reluctance – the Central Pacific Railroad company changed strategies and began hiring Chinese. By 1869, after having crested the Donner Summit, considered through its few years of construction work the company had upwards of twenty thousand Chinese on the payroll.



1876- Chinese laborers on a handcar during construction of Central Pacific Railroad line between Bakersfield & Los Angeles. This [work](#) (by Andrew J. Russell), identified by [Oakland Museum of California](#), is free of known copyright restrictions.

Scholars heretofore have found little evidence of how so many Chinese could be hired by one company, and in such a relatively short period of intense construction. How could the railroad company locate so many thousands of Chinese? What did it take to convince Chinese to commit to being employed in this line of work? Who helped the Chinese collect their pay for their work in railroad construction?

We have found the answer in the CPRR payroll records. In the fine print of names, occupations, and payments, we have revealed the labor value of the Chinese railroad workers. In our painstaking analysis, we find that nearly every monthly payroll sheet beginning in 1864 includes payment to Chinese workers. We calculate that the CPRR company paid to its Chinese workforce a total of over three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars – at the time an immense sum for one enterprise – and for one immigrant community. There is, however, an anomaly that we initially found puzzling. Out of the total of nearly twenty thousand Chinese individuals, we found approximately only eight hundred differentiated named entries referring to Chinese individuals. The difference between the total Chinese workforce and the total of Chinese names pointed us to a striking insight.

Among the Chinese who migrated to build the railroad were individuals who built enterprises. In answer to the mystery of how the white owned railroad construction company could locate, hire, and organize payments to tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants, we find that it was the Chinese themselves who formed their own labor subcontracting businesses. Returning to the payroll records, we find when the construction reached the most arduous heights of the Sierra Nevada, and in the urgency of beating the heaviest winter snowfall, the payroll records can be unpacked to reveal increasingly larger proportion of payments to Chinese. This indicates a dependency on the Chinese laborers when stakes were highest. During the peak construction summer/fall seasons of 1866 through 1868, when the construction crested the heights of the famous and treacherous Donner Summit, the Chinese used their leverage to gain employment under the aegis of their own Chinese sub-contractors.

More than five hundred entries in the payroll sheets from these culminating seasons list Chinese names receiving payments that by our calculation account for wages for pay groups comprised of on average fifteen to twenty-five workers. Of the total of over three hundred seventy-five thousand dollars of salaries paid to the Chinese, we estimate more than three hundred thousand of those dollars were paid to Chinese workers in such pay groups through Chinese labor contractors. These Chinese contractors may not have served as the construction supervisors, but they performed the indispensable role of collecting aggregate payments to supply the Chinese labor force, account for their work performed, and subsequently distribute pay. The use of Chinese labor contractors accounts for the means by which the white owned company was able to employ its massive and indispensable Chinese labor force. The payments to Chinese labor contractors also explains why the company relied on, yet apparently never named the vast majority of its individual Chinese employees.

The book *The Chinese and the Iron Road: The Building of the Transcontinental Railroad* reveals our most updated understanding of the Chinese migrants' work and lived experience. The book's multi-disciplinary perspectives provide access to new historical material, and to the latest informed analysis of the Chinese migrants home origins, journey across the Pacific, railroad construction employment, material and cultural community, and for many, their return home after they completed the construction.

Readers of this latest book from the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford will be able to follow the dramatic historical discoveries, and witness the Chinese migrant laborer's contribution to reunifying the nation on the heels of the U.S. Civil War. The book ultimately takes readers on a journey to rediscover the heretofore-lost memory of these workers – and ideally will inspire the next generation of historians and interested public to continue the search for elusive written records of personal voices of the Chinese who crossed the ocean to forge America's own connection across its continent.

[Start reading *The Chinese and the Iron Road* »](#)

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