

1.2 - The Contributions of the Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Level(s)	5-12
Lesson Overview	With dreams of having a better life, thousands of Chinese risked their lives across the Pacific Ocean to join in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad from 1863 to 1869. These Chinese laborers worked under extreme and hazardous environments. Due to their ethnic appearance and language barriers, the Chinese were greatly taken advantage of by their employers. These Chinese laborers became pioneers in the collective labor actions of American labor history, while also contributing to the economies of the U.S. and China.
Lesson Objectives	Students will learn: • The contributions of Chinese railroad workers and immigrants to the economies of the United States and home countries abroad. • The pay disparities and working conditions of Chinese railroad workers and immigrant workers. • The fact the Chinese railroad workers' contributions were not recognized. • The reasons immigrants wanted to come to the U.S. • To research the railroad's impact on the Native Americans' lives, communities and homelands.

Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers Essay:

The construction of the 1,776 mile Transcontinental Railroad was established by the Federal Government's Pacific Railroad Act. Two companies, the Central Pacific Railroad starting from the West and the Union Pacific Railroad starting from the East took on the immense task to build this project thus linking travel between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The 660 miles of the Central Pacific railroad started in Sacramento in 1863. Between 1863-1869 the Central Pacific hired more than 13,000 Chinese laborers to support the construction. It took the construction crews comprised of 80% to 90% Chinese laborers, fifteen months to drill and blast through 1,659 feet of rock to complete the Summit Tunnel at Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

The Chinese workers' contribution to this historic task has been extensively overlooked by American mainstream society. The Transcontinental Railroad contributed and changed America in so many ways. It facilitated a far-reaching scale of domestic commerce and international trade. During the 1880's, the annual amount of freight that the railroad transported was worth around \$50 million per year. In 1872, the first mail-order catalog business was formed due to the new transportation system. In addition, with the railroad, transportation expense and travel cost were reduced by 85%. Moreover, the Transcontinental Railroad connected numerous scattered cities and towns across the West, making it easy for immigrants to settle across the land. With the help of the railroad's stringent schedules, the U.S. government had to rethink how it marked time and adopted the four standard time zones in 1883. Importantly, the railroad became a symbol of a growing industrial power and a source of national confidence in the U.S. by facilitating American prestige (Kiger, 2019). When the Pacific Railroad was completed, not one Chinese laborer was shown on the picture of the railway completion celebration at Promontory Point Utah. In fact, although Chinese labor contributed to all those achievements minimal current recognition has been given. Even in today's America immigrant contributions are often downplayed.

Chinese workers not only contributed to the U.S. economy as their **remittance** to their home country also helped economic development in their hometowns. At the time during the nineteenth century one week's pay in America was equivalent to several months of wages in China. Thus, from their meager earnings many Chinese in America emerged as a new class of aristocrats in Guangdong province (Chang, 2004). Chinese saved a huge proportion of their meager wages and sent their savings to their families in China, thus contributing to improved living conditions in China. They also financially supported the XinHai revolution in 1911, also known as the Chinese Revolution which abolished the last imperial dynasty and established the Republic of China.

As Chinese labor was the major force in railroad construction, they endured immense life safety concerns. From the first day they traveled to the U.S., thousands of Chinese were crammed in tight quarters, lacking fresh water, food, air and sunlight. This deadly journey from Hong Kong took 75 to 100 days to reach California, with 1,620 workers out of 2,523 losing their lives during the voyage, a death rate of 64%. (Dong, Hu & Chinese American Society, 2010; Ye, 2011).

When they arrived in America, the Chinese laborers worked as mentioned, in extremely dangerous conditions without proper protection. It took the Chinese laborers fifteen months to drill and blast through 1,659 feet of rock to complete the Summit Tunnel at Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Chinese workers blasted a total of 15 tunnels and built 40 miles of snow sheds to keep blizzards from blocking the tracks. An example of the dangers faced by the Chinese workers was a three-mile stretch along the precipitous gorge over the American River, nicknamed "Cape Horn." The slope was at an angle of seventy-five degrees, and the river was in places, twenty-two hundred feet below. The railroad, etched on the side of the mountain, required blasting to cut along the sheer cliffs (Ambrose, 2000). Moreover, the most dangerous time was during the winter, when avalanches killed dozens of workers. When building the railroad through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the death rate of Chinese workers was greater than 10% of the work force (Lu, 1997). Several Chinese associations were tasked to recover remains of Chinese workers for repatriation back to China. This immense task was a solemn promise given to these dedicated Chinese souls. (Dong, Hu & Chinese American Society, 2010).

Moreover, the Chinese laborers were unfairly treated while working high-intensity jobs in a deadly working environment. White Caucasian workers were paid \$35 per month with food and accommodation, but Chinese laborers initially received only \$26 without food, accommodation nor basic insurance (Huang, 2006). Furthermore, White supervisors could whip Chinese laborers without any reason. Starting on June 25th, 1867, in Truckee, Chinese laborers held an eight-day silent protest on wage dispute and asked for the same payment as the White workers (Dong, Hu & Chinese American Society, 2010). The

railroad company suppressed this protest by cutting down the food supply channels and not paying their salaries. The owners had the advantage and utilized the labor issues between the Chinese, Irish, Italian, German immigrants as well as free black workers to foment distrust and unfair competition. Though the company did not concede to the strikers' demands, it would be a mistake to conclude, as most historical accounts do, that the Chinese "lost." Even though Chinese workers did not obtain the same pay as White workers, the strike helped them to reduce their extreme working hours and the whipping of Chinese laborers. In addition, the most experienced Chinese laborers received wage increases (Jin, 2019). The company leadership would not forget the confrontation and realized that the workers could never be taken for granted. What is more, it appears that the company also quietly improved pay following the strike (Chang, 2019). After the completion of the railroad construction, many Chinese returned to China with their new fortune. Others stayed and persevered but indeed faced discrimination and denial by American society.

Bibliography

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Vocabulary:

- **Golden Spike:** During the "Golden Spike Ceremony" on May 10, 1869, the rail lines of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific were joined at Promontory Summit, Utah. Of the 15,000 Chinese workers that comprised almost ninety percent of the Central Pacific labor force, none were visible in the iconic photograph taken on that day.¹
- **Remittance:** The transfer of money sent by migrants to family members and relatives in their home countries²
- **Spike:** Railroad spike is applied to fasten steel rail to the railway sleeper and ensure the regular gauge between two rails.³

¹Adapted from Long Island Wins.

<https://longislandwins.com/news/national/why-no-chinese-in-famous-transcontinental-railroad-photograph/>

²Adapted from International Monetary Fund.

<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/basics/remitt.htm#:~:text=When%20migrants%20send%20home%20part,income%20for%20many%20developing%20countries.>

³Adopted from Railroads In America, U.S. History. <https://www.american-rails.com/spike.html>

Discussion Questions:

- What purpose did the Transcontinental Railroad serve for the U.S. economy at that time?
- Why were Chinese workers needed to build the Transcontinental Railroad?
- Why did the Chinese workers want to come to the U.S. to build the railroad?
- What parts of the railroad did the Chinese build? Why?
- Why were the Chinese not included in the completion ceremony photograph at Promontory Point? Why weren't they given credit for their work for over 100 years?

- How did the railroad impact the Native Americans' lives, communities and homelands?
- What type of jobs do immigrant and migrant workers take on today?
- Why does the U.S. want to bring in immigrant and migrant workers?
- Why do immigrant and migrant workers continue to come to the United States today?

Activity 1:

A. Mapping the Transcontinental Railroad

1. Show the video clip. Ask students to read the essay.
2. Distribute the [Transcontinental Railroad Construct the Facts](#) handout. The purpose of this activity is for students to learn the location of the Transcontinental Railroad.
 - Divide the class in a few groups to complete the activity. ([Answer key](#) is provided.)

B. The Chinese Transcontinental Railroad workers

Have a class discussion on the following:

1. What purpose did the Transcontinental Railroad serve for the U.S. economy at the time when slavery was outlawed?
2. Why were Chinese workers needed to build the Transcontinental Railroad?
3. What parts of the railroad did the Chinese build? What was particular about the region they were working on that required Chinese workers?
4. Why were the Chinese not included in the completion ceremony photograph at Promontory Point? Why weren't they given credit for their work for over 100 years?
5. Why did the Chinese workers want to come to the U.S. to build the railroad?
6. How did the Chinese contribute to their home country while working abroad?

Activity 2:

The impact of the Transcontinental Railroad

Ask the students to research on the impact of the Transcontinental Railroad on Native Americans.

1. How did the Transcontinental Railroad impact the U.S. economy?
2. How did the railroad impact the Native Americans' lives, communities and homelands?

Activity 3:

Present day immigrant and migrant workers

Ask students to research on present day immigrant and migrant workers.

1. What type of jobs do immigrant and migrant workers take on today?
2. Why does the U.S. want to bring in immigrant and migrant workers? Do we need them? Why or why not?
3. Why do immigrant and migrant workers continue to come to the United States?
4. How do immigrant and migrant workers contribute to their home country while working abroad?

Further Information:

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