

**Cost of Expanding Frontier:**

**Chinese Laborers in the Construction of the Transcontinental Railroads**

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Individual Website

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## Process Paper

### Topic

I knew little of the Transcontinental Railroad until half a year ago when my English teacher assigned me to write an essay on the topic. The essay was neither formal nor detailed, but through the brief research about Transcontinental Railroad, I discovered an interesting yet scarcely mentioned human rights problem: the exploitation of Chinese laborers. While some people have focused on technology and the economic impact of the Transcontinental Railroad, I became more interested in the human side of the story, as a novel idea and especially as a result of the increasing discussion about human and workers' rights problems today.

### Research

At first, I attempted to grasp the whole view of the Transcontinental Railroad first, then narrowed it down to Chinese labor issues. Therefore, I read Stephen Ambrose's *Nothing Like It In the World*, which separated the construction stages by time. Through reading this grand scheme, I generally understood the motives of the Central Pacific and Chinese laborers. Moreover, the difficult construction process can be the best evidence of resilience and diligence, which makes these people great. I came up with three research questions: Why were Chinese workers enacted from the Golden Spike photo? How did the strike of Chinese workers in 1867 fail and how did it shape further stereotypes about Chinese? What was the connection between the Transcontinental Railroads and the Exclusion Act? Then, I read Gordon Chang's *Ghosts of Gold Mountain*, which focused on Chinese laborers. I discovered numerous primary sources, including Charles Crocker's quotes, Cantonese folk songs, etc. After understanding from the Chinese perspective, I researched the legacy of this event: the Exclusion Act.

## **Website**

I decided to create a website because of my interest in computer science. I learned Python and Java before. Moreover, I discovered the development of digital history: multiple universities conducted research projects online recently. I believe that websites will be a trend for historical research in future. My project would be the start of developing my digital history experience. Regarding the NHD website builder, it was hard to adapt at first because of the restrictions. But using both the website builder and my HTML knowledge, I finally produced my research project, thanks to the assistance from my history teacher for revisions and website building.

## **Frontiers in History**

I took a different approach to examining the frontiers. Superficially, I attempted to expose the neglected sacrifices of frontiers. People often remember how the Transcontinental Railroads is a frontier of opening the west, which facilitates transportation across the nation and the economic and agricultural prosperity of the west coast. However, the Chinese workers' efforts are ignored, as proved by mistreatments, being discarded from the Last Spike photo, and the Exclusion Act. More profoundly, I am acknowledging the "frontier" that the erased histories are recapturing people's attention nowadays. In my project, Chinese descendants celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Last Spike to remind people of their ancestors' impact. The trend that hidden histories are recognized is a significant frontier of viewing history.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

California State Legislature, "Foreign Miner's License," *SHEC: Resources for Teachers*.

Accessed December 21, 2022. <https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1714>.

This is a primary source of the California State Legislature, which enforces "Foreign Miner's License." This law marked California's start of discriminating against foreigners politically, by imposing foreigners a tax of 20 dollars to permit gold mining. I used this source to demonstrate how the immigration of Chinese in the 1850s soon attracted hatred towards this ethnic group.

*Charles Crocker*. Photograph. American Rails. <https://www.american-rails.com/charles-crocker.html>.

This is a photo of Charles Crocker, one of the founders of the Central Pacific and the supervisor of the Construction. I included him to demonstrate his praise to Chinese workers but meanwhile treating them unequally to maximize the economic profit.

Chinese Exclusion Act, Fed. Reg. (May 6, 1882). <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act#:~:text=It%20was%20the%20first%20significant,immigrating%20to%20the%20United%20States>.

This is the primary source of a regulation passed by Congress to restrict the immigration of Chinese. The Exclusion Act marked the start of targeting a specific ethnic group on restrictions and the shift to being exclusionary to immigrants. I used this document to demonstrate the impact of Chinese workers on the Transcontinental Railroad: their low labor wage and "filthy" Chinatown attracted xenophobia, which eventually led to the Exclusion Act.

*Chinese Gold Miners in California*. Photograph. Open Rivers. 1889. Accessed December 21, 2022. [https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/locating-indigeneity/chinese\\_gold\\_miners\\_b/](https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/locating-indigeneity/chinese_gold_miners_b/).

This photo depicts the Chinese miners working together in California. The early-arrived Chinese mainly relied on mining for work, which later turned to other jobs after the restrictions on foreign miners. I used this photo in the section "Chinese Immigration" to demonstrate how they worked together to create bigger profits.

Chinese Workers Building a Trestle. Photograph. Smithsonian.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/transcontinental-railroad-chinese-laborers-180971919/>.

This photo illustrates one scene of the Chinese workers building a trestle in 1865 with pick and shovel wheelbarrows. I used it on the home page for evidence of the Chinese efforts in the construction.

*Daily Alta California* (San Francisco, CA). "By State Telegraph." July 3, 1867. Accessed January 12, 2023. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi->

bin/cdnc?a=d&d=DAC18670703.2.11&srpos=2&e=01-01-1867-01-12-1867-186-en--20-DAC-1-byDA-txt-txIN-Crocker+railroad+strike-----1.

This primary source is an article from Daily Alta California, Volume 19, Number 6319, 3 July 1867. It provides evidence for the Chinese strike of 1867, especially its end. I used an image of this newspaper as evidence of the end of the strike.

*Fair of the Iron Horse: Replica of Peter Cooper's "Tom Thumb."* Photograph. Baltimore County Public Museum. Accessed December 15, 2022.

<https://catalog.bcpl.lib.md.us/polaris/search/title.aspx?ctx=1.1033.0.0.6&pos=4&cn=240911>.

This photo records the replica of the firstly assembled steam locomotive in the United States, Tom Thumb. With locomotive technology, the United States had the chance to explore the West with railroads, which triggered the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. I used this photo in the section "Gold Rush" to describe the background of the signature of the Pacific Railway Act.

*The Gold Mine.* Photograph. Digital History. 1890. Accessed December 15, 2022.

[https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=8&psid=2655&filepath=http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/primarysources\\_upload/images/prospecter\\_1.jpg](https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=8&psid=2655&filepath=http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/primarysources_upload/images/prospecter_1.jpg).

This photo captures an old gentleman digging for gold. I used this photo in the section "Gold Rush" to demonstrate people who were attracted by Gold Rush moved to the West to seek fortune and wealth.

Lee, Corkey. 150th Anniversary of the Golden Spike Ceremony. Photograph. National Public Radio. May 10, 2014.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/05/10/311157404/descendants-of-chinese-laborers-reclaim-railroads-history>.

This photo depicts the 150th Anniversary of the Golden Spike Ceremony, mainly consisting of Asian Descendants. Over the past decades, people are gaining awareness of this forgotten history as the descendants attempt to leave their ancestors a mark in the United States history. I used this photo in the section "Legacy" as a concluding image of my website.

The Pacific Railway Act, Fed. Reg. (July 1, 1862). Accessed December 20, 2022.

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/pacific-railway-act#:~:text=Transcript,-Thirty%20Seventh&text=An%20Act%20To%20aid%20in,%2C%20military%2C%20and%20other%20purposes>.

This primary source documents the signature of the Pacific Railway Act, in which President Lincoln consented to the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad for the exploration of the West and the unity of the nation. I used this document to explain the origin of the Transcontinental Railroad, right before when Central Pacific and Union Pacific began to construct.

The Page Act of 1875, C.F.R. (). <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1875Immigration%20Act.pdf>.

This primary source is the document of the Page Act, which forbids East Asian women from entering the United States for prostitution. This law eventually banned all East

Asian women whatsoever and laid the fundament for the Exclusion Act. I used this document to present this early immigration act, which originates the inequality from the official government.

*Railroad Chinese Immigrants*. Photograph. Truckee-Donner Historical Society.

<https://www.truckeehistory.org/chinese---heroes-of-the-railroad.html>.

This photo presents the scene when the Chinese constructed a cut at the Sierra foothills in 1866. I used this photo in the section "Working Conditions" to demonstrate the hard work of the Chinese throughout the whole construction process.

Report of the Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration, S. Doc. No. 44, 2d Sess. (Feb. 27, 1877). [http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese\\_Immigration.html](http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese_Immigration.html).

This primary source documents the investigation of the effectiveness of Chinese laborers. It mainly includes the testimonial from Charles Crocker, who praised the ability of the Chinese. I used this evidence to argue that the Chinese were as effective as white workers.

*Sacramento Union*, July 1867. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18670712&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->.

This primary source is a *Sacramento Union* article in July 1867, recording the employment of Chinese workers in Transcontinental Railroad construction. The *Sacramento Union* reported that the Chinese wanted to eliminate "the right of the overseers of the company to either whip them or restrain them from leaving the road when they desire to seek other employment." I used this article to demonstrate the Chinese had no choice but to construct the railroad.

Two Photos of the Last Spike Ceremony. Photograph. History Matters. Accessed April 11, 2023. <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/text/puzzle2ans.html>.

These primary sources are two photos of the "Last Spike" Ceremony, which one includes the Chinese workers and the other excludes. I used both photos for a contrast of how the efforts of Chinese workers were intentionally ignored. These two photos are crucial to my thesis, proving that discrimination against the Chinese existed.

## Secondary Sources

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Nothing like It in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1863-1869*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

This book depicts the overview of the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. I read the whole book to grab a general understanding and the timeline of this event. This book also offered me some primary sources to investigate, such as quotes from Charles Crocker and newspaper reports.

Chang, Gordon H., Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Hilton Obenzinger, and Roland Hsu. *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019.

This is a historical book focusing on Chinese workers during the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. I carefully read this book to understand the real situations of the Chinese, especially the time period around the Strike. This book also offered me some primary sources such as pictures of Chinese and quotes from Charles Crocker.

"Honoring Chinese Contributions to the Transcontinental Railroad." Video. Union Pacific. Posted June 2, 2015. [https://www.up.com/aboutup/community/inside\\_track/chinese-150-6-2-2015.htm](https://www.up.com/aboutup/community/inside_track/chinese-150-6-2-2015.htm).

This video introduces the 150th anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad. The Chinese descendants gathered around to educate the influence of their ancestors. The video includes a speech by Gene Chan, a fourth descendant of a Chinese laborer in construction. This also proves the gradually increasing attention to neglected histories.

Kennedy, Lesley. "Building the Transcontinental Railroad: How 20,000 Chinese Immigrants Made It Happen." History. Last modified April 2022. Accessed January 11, 2023.

<https://www.history.com/news/transcontinental-railroad-chinese-immigrants>.

This website offers me some books and primary sources to look into, describing the general timeline of Chinese workers. I used two photos for my website and discovered the Stanford project from this webpage.

Long, Joe, Carlo Medici, Nancy Qian, and Marco Tabellini. *The Impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act on the U.S. Economy*. Accessed January 6, 2023.

[https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/23-008\\_ff452f33-bb64-4e13-82a0-89dce7acfeca.pdf](https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/23-008_ff452f33-bb64-4e13-82a0-89dce7acfeca.pdf).

This research paper analyzes the impact of the Exclusion Act on the West Coast's economy. The research concludes that the act significantly decreases the labor wage and production in various fields. I included this evidence as a negative legacy of the Exclusion Act, which not only demonstrates racial discrimination but also economic loss.

Pandya, Meera Munoz. "The Transcontinental Railroad and the Asian-American Story."

Smithsonian. Last modified November 2019. [https://postalmuseum.si.edu/the-transcontinental-railroad-and-the-asian-american-story#\\_ftn12](https://postalmuseum.si.edu/the-transcontinental-railroad-and-the-asian-american-story#_ftn12).

This article explains the xenophobia phenomenon nationwide and the impact of the Exclusion Act on Asians. I used this article to state the cultural aspect of the legacy of the Exclusion Act, which includes the continuous stereotypes of Asians.

Stanford University. Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University. Last modified 2019. Accessed January 7, 2023.

<https://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/website/>.

This project website lists the complete timeline from the Chinese perspective in railroad construction. I not only gained a lot of useful information but also found two books written by the project members related to my topic: *The Chinese and the Iron Road*:

*Building the Transcontinental Railroad and Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad.*

Sylvester, Terray. "Chinese-American Pride Celebrated in 150th Anniversary of Transcontinental Railroad." Reuters. Last modified May 9, 2019. Accessed January 7, 2023.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-goldenspike/chinese-american-pride-celebrated-in-150th-anniversary-of-transcontinental-railroad-idUSKCN1SF2HI>.

This article records the 150th anniversary of the Last Spike Ceremony when the Chinese descendants gathered together to recognize their ancestors' contribution to the railroad. I used this article to present that this hidden history has been noticed and the Chinese-American history is reaching new altitudes.

Takaki, Ronald T. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 1998.

This book described the situations of Asians when they first arrived on the West Coast. I used this book as evidence of the early mistreatment of Asians before they were hired to build the railroad.

Williams, John Hoyt. *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad*. New York: Times Books, 1988.

This book describes the general timeline of both Central Pacific and Union Pacific, which does not include a lot of details. I used this book as an overview of the situation, especially understanding how this time period is typically portrayed.

Wu, Yuning. "Chinese Exclusion Act." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 25, 2022.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-Exclusion-Act>.

This online encyclopedia offers me the political impact of the Exclusion Act, which sets the cornerstone of the United States turning exclusionary to immigrants. I used this encyclopedia as the political legacy of the Exclusion Act.