

Gordon H. Chang / Shelley Fisher Fishkin (eds.): *The Chinese and the Iron Road. Building the Transcontinental Railroad*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2019, 539 p.

Reviewed by
Thorben Pelzer, Leipzig

In 1869, Leland Stanford's "golden spike" joined the rails of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific, forming the first transcontinental railroad of the United States. The two lines quickened passenger flow and economically vitalised the American West. Much has been written about symbolic meanings and practical consequences of the infrastructure, as well as about the "Big Four" railroad entrepreneurs behind the enterprise. The manual labourers however, many of them Chinese emigrants, have remained an unknown quantity. As discriminations against class and race intersected, historical sources are generally scarce. The workers left behind no known documents detailing their points of view. For the vast majority, not even their names were recorded.

The lengthy edited volume at hand is an outcome of the "Chinese Railroad Workers in North America" project at Stanford University. The interdisciplinary team includes, among others, the historian Gordon H. Chang, the literary scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and the archaeologist Barbara Voss. The group faced the equally daunting and exciting task to capture the life of the Chinese railway workers in the

absence of concrete sources. Their way of dealing with the problem is best described as a method of multi-angular "approaching". The 21 essays never create the illusion of fully capturing the forgotten railway workers. Instead, the contributors encircle their subjects and observe them from a distance: through photos, through accounts of white acquaintances, through oral histories of descendants, through material excavations at the camps, or through cultural memory found in novels.

Subtracting the chapters introducing the historical background, the editors arranged the essays into four analytical parts. The three authors of the first cluster return to the Chinese coastal regions in search for clues about the railway workers' finances. Zhang explains the schemes of labour contractors in China. Workers accrued debt to finance their emigration. Creditors were often member of the expatriate's clan and saw the labour as a form of investment (p. 62). Native places absorbed not only wealth but also culture of the returnees. Yuan's and Liu's studies focus on remittances the workers sent back home. While in the early years, returnees acted as couriers, soon "Gold Mountain trading firms" offered remittance services to the railway labourers. These companies did not transfer money to the Mainland directly but invested it in their import-export business. The next cluster of texts is composed of eight studies most directly concerned with recovering the reality of the railroad workers. They include the chapters of the archaeological group of the Stanford project. Spatial analysis of the working camps points at a racist segregation, with Chinese workers residing on uneven, mosquito-ridden terrains. Abandoned everyday

tools support the idea of ethnic division and distinction, as the tools of consumption resembled those of the Chinatowns and their native home villages. As Voss describes, the household utensils reveal global commodity chains that reached “the most remote locations” (p. 113). Ritualistic and ludic items, such as incense burners and improvised gaming tokens, also reveal practices of native traditions. Using bioarchaeological data from skeletal remains, Kennedy et al. go into detail about health and healthcare of the railroad workers. They boiled tea, hunted game, caught fish, and prepared a large variety of vegetables, resulting in a diet that was more nutritious than that of workers from other ethnicities. Describing San Francisco Chinatown temples, Gin Lum describes religious worshipping practices of immigrants and their fear of not having their bodies returned to China in case of death. Huang’s article provides interesting contemplations on the encounters between Chinese workers and Native Americans. She describes a complex relationship, marked by similar sufferings, and argues that the indigenous and the diasporic constitute “mirror images” (p. 180). The essay also includes examples of interracial intimacy and Chinese inclusion into Native families. Khor’s article analyses photographs, especially the stereoviews of the transcontinental railroad’s official photographer Alfred A. Hart (1816–1908). She argues that even though the Chinese workers appear on the photos, they were often “dwarfed” and “subsumed in relation to nature and the machine” (p. 200). Finally, Robinson analyses accounts of Europeans who travelled and worked in the States during the time. The travellers essentialised the Chinese immigrants

using positive and negative attributes and described their relation to the white workers.

The following three chapters deal with the cultural memory of the railway and its labourers. Gow provides an interesting study of US-American history textbooks. After 1900, the railroad worker became “the primary symbol of Chinese immigrant labor” and embodied the “hopes and anxieties” of the white population (p. 238). Only in the 1960s, a move from othering to inclusion began. Yuan’s article acts as a counterpart in that it analyses Mainland Chinese historiography. In the early Communist histories of the 1950s, railroad workers were interpreted as an example of labour exploitation. More recently, since the 1980s, historians have instead focused on the empire-building function of the railroad and the importance which Chinese labourers played in accomplishing this feat. Last in the cluster, Feng reads the novels *Donald Duk* (1991) by Frank Chin (b. 1940) and *Dragon’s Gate* (1993) by Laurence Yep (b. 1948). For Feng, both works present a “a common desire” of Chinese American writers to compensate for the railway workers’ absence in historical sources through the means of fiction.

Five historical studies about the heritage and aftereffects of the Chinese labour migration conclude the volume. As Chen points out, labour migration fostered the first Chinese community organisations and the spread of secret societies. Chung follows the Chinese influence towards the development of railway towns in Nevada, while Lew-Williams follows the tracks of Chin Gee Hee (1844–1929), a railroader-turned-entrepreneur who later invested in the development of railways in China.

Chang's essay on the reception of Leland Stanford is a great way to conclude the volume. The railway entrepreneur's "deeply conflicted and often contradictory attitude" (p. 347) reflects the public reception of Chinese labour migration.

The assemblage of so many different approaches is innovative and unquestionably of value. This being the case, the authors make it transparent that not every research is new from the ground up. Some chapters are digests of existing studies reconfigured to meet the railroad topic. Other contributors make clear that they profit from existing research. Facing a lack of historical sources, the authors needed to get creative. Most of the 21 studies succeeded in providing puzzle pieces towards creating an image of the Chinese railroad workers. However, some approaches are rather far-fetched. The inclusion of a study on Cuban sugar plantation workers seems justified to some degree, even though the author admits the "speculative" nature (p. 43). But how much can an analysis of remittance schemes of the "somewhat later" 1940s possibly "extrapolate" about the reality of manual labourers in the 1860s (pp. 76, 82)?

Anyone reading the volume cover to cover will encounter frequent repetitions. To some extent this problem is inevitable. Each chapter aspires to stand on its own while sharing the common topic, consequently retelling parts of the same story. Nonetheless, a greater streamlining would have been desirable. Furthermore, not all chapters are of equal quality. A reader studying the bibliographical notes will find Robinson and Shu guilty of citing the internet encyclopaedias Wikipedia and Baidu Baike. The latter also ignores basic

rules of Chinese Pinyin hyphenation. The volume's high point is the archaeological section, which provide fascinating insights into the labourers' everyday life and interactions. The articles focusing on cultural and popular memories likewise provide creative entry points to analyse what Chinese railroad labourers have eventually become to symbolise, even when their historical conclusiveness is limited by design. The historical articles display a great attention to meticulous details. However, they often end with very short conclusions which barely leave the descriptive level.

The edited volume is a much-welcomed contribution towards approaching the subject of Chinese railway workers in the United States. Sometimes, the legitimate desire to vindicate the forgotten Chinese railroad workers falls into the trap of affirming essentialisms – e. g. when Fisher Fishkin maintains that the heterogeneous group of Chinese immigrants "performed herculean feats of endurance and strength" (p. 293). However, given the historical absence of individual voices, such generalisations may have been almost unavoidable. The volume reminds its readers that there are still blank spaces in the history from below, especially when dealing with infrastructures and mobilities. The Chinese railway workers were exemplary for a modern, globalised world. The contributors recognise this and rehabilitate them as the human actors they were.