Chinese Sojourn Labour

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Historical Paper

Paper Length: 1,651 Words
The 19th century American western settlement was a place of choice. It was a unique environment to assess the interaction of individual choices and institutional outcomes. According to Scott Alan Carson in his paper ‘Chinese Sojourn Labor and the American Transcontinental Railroad’. It was considered a place for rugged individualism, along with boundless opportunity. Two explicit outcomes of economic growth were the first transcontinental railroad, which demanded intense Chinese sojourn labour and the Chinese migration companies, which brought the immigration of Chinese workers to America.

The Transcontinental Railroad changed America forever, and its construction was dependent on immigrant Chinese Labor. 19th-century Chinese immigration to the US was the product of dynamic labour relationships that drew Chinese immigrants to America, escaping the harsh realities of 19th century China. The traditional view of Chinese sojourn labour in the 19th century American West is that the Chinese were the low-cost alternative to European and American born labour. However, The turnover costs of hiring Native and European workers actually forced railroad administrators to substitute Chinese workers for Native and European labourers.

The Pacific Railway Act of 1962 created, at the time, the largest construction project in American history: the Transcontinental Railroad. The Act provided land grants and subsidies to the two rail companies that built the road (Carson 81). The Central Pacific Railroad began its eastward quest from Sacramento, California in 1863. The Union Pacific Railroad began its westward march two years later from Omaha, Nebraska. In May, six years later, the two sides merged nearly 1,800 miles of track and bound it with a golden spike at Promontory Point, Utah. Afterwards, the liberty bell was rung, Wall Street closed early, there was a seven-mile-long parade in Chicago, and cannon salutes across the land (Williams 267).

Significant research exists concerning the financial and social returns of the Transcontinental railroad, however, the labour relations concerning the workers and employers have received less attention. Railroad administrators initially segregated and queued Chinese workers into low skill, high-stress positions due to racial stereotyping. However, the high transaction costs of labour turnover lead administrators to experiment with Chinese immigrants, eventually putting them into more advanced tasks. By the time the Central Pacific railroad was
completed, it had been constructed using primarily Chinese labour. The process of employing
low transaction cost employees, and labour queuing may have changed employment
opportunities available to the 19th century, Chinese workers.

In 1848 Chinese workers arrived in the American Pacific pursuing the rich goldfields of
California and later, to work on the Transcontinental Railroad (Carson 82). Migration push
factors from China included the opium war from 1840 to 1842 and British imperialism in China
(Carson 82). These push and pull factors facing Chinese workers are what fluctuated the Chinese
net migration flow to America (as seen in Figure 1, recorded by the San Francisco Customs
House).

Figure 1
Chinese Net Migration Flow through San Francisco Customs House

Source: U.S. Customs House.

The thirty-one-year interval between 1849 and 1880 was significantly altered by
America’s pull factors, and many fluctuations are related to America’s economic events. As
mentioned earlier, throughout the 1850’s Chinese workers were drawn to California’s goldfields.
However, when 1850’s employment opportunities for Europeans evaporated, hostility towards
Chinese workers increased, promoting anti-Chinese legislation (Carson 82). In April 1855, the
California State legislature passed the Act to Discourage the Immigration to this State of Persons
Who Can Not Become Citizens Thereof and in 1858 the Act to Prevent the Further Immigration
of Chinese or Mongolians to this State (Carson 82). If Chinese immigrants did not pay California’s state foreign miners license tax, all Chinese over 18 years of age were required to pay a $2.50 tax per person. In the early 1860’s the California State Legislature released a series of taxes specifically targeted at Chinese miners and fishermen, and in 1863 they also enacted a law in which Indian, Mongolian or Chinese immigrants could not give court evidence in favour, or against any Caucasian man. The Act to Encourage Immigration was passed in 1864, legalizing limited contract labour to one year (Carson 83).

During the mid-1860s, the construction of the Transcontinental railroad required large inputs of capital and labour, changing the economic opportunity for Chinese workers (Carson 83). Since the United States government awarded land grants per mile of track constructed, both the Union Pacific Railroad and Central Pacific Railroad gained capital by laying track. More track laid meant an increased demand for labour and capital, so construction depended on access to a dependable labour force. General Grenville Dodge’s Irish crews led to the Union Pacific’s success because of rapid access to materials via the Missouri River and Irish immigrants eager for employment translated to the Union Pacific laying nearly a mile of track a day in 1866. On the other hand, the Central Pacific found attracting and maintaining a reliable workforce more difficult and construction slowed to a halt. Construction director Charles Crocker was the first director to be convinced of the value of Chinese labour. Facing a labour shortage, Crocker suggested recruiting Chinese, a group that earlier had worked on the California Central Railroad and the San Jose Railroad (NBC news Chris Fuchs). Crocker was satisfied by the response of these Chinese labourers and by the end of 1863 advertised and hired approximately 5,000 more (Williams 94). By the end of the 1860s, 90 percent of the Central Pacific Railroad labourers were Chinese. However, the Chinese were not only hired because they were dependable hard workers. The Central Pacific could hire the Chinese for well below what native and European workers demanded. Once negative sentiments concerning the Chinese’s presence on the railroad subsided, California’s 1860 fishing tax was repealed. The environment for Chinese workers improved and once again Chinese immigration to America increased.

In 1870, Russell Conwell suggested that during the construction of the Transcontinental railroad that the “State of California was not sufficiently supplied with enough labourers to carry
on its own liberal enterprises, and was consequently ill-prepared to undertake the grading of a thousand miles of railroad [...]” Thus California faced a 19th-century labour shortage that threatened to hamper its economic growth, along with other western states (Carson 84).

Between 1868 and 1876, Chinese immigrants were drawn to the opportunities of America’s railroads and California’s agriculture. California's agriculture may have been alternative employment for Chinese labourers after construction on the Central Pacific Railroad was completed (Carson 84). Like the transcontinental railroad, American planters found Chinese workers to be dependable during periods of labour scarcity. Many farms listed their number of Chinese workers between 8 and 20 percent. However, the number of Chinese owned farms never constituted a large share of California’s agriculture. The typical Chinese-owned farm was small in terms of land and labour. While Chinese ownership of pacific farms was negligible, Chinese agricultural labour made up an increasing share of California's agricultural labour (Carson 84). Much of the increase in Chinese agriculture followed the construction of the Pacific Railroad in the 1870s, and Chinese farmers also made their way to Southern California with the Southern Pacific Railroad. Later, construction on the Great Northern, Southern and Northern Pacific Railroads almost exclusively used Chinese and other Asian workers. The Chinese were also employed in Western manufacturing, they worked primarily in clothing, woollen, shoe, and cigar manufacturing.

Throughout the 1870s Chinese workers became known for their willingness to take on occupations for which native-born and European workers were unwilling to undertake at the prevailing wage, and more Chinese workers entered America than left for China. Nevertheless, political and social forces were constant snares to the economic progress of 19th-century Chinese workers (Carson 85). Later, during the part of the 1870s when employment slowed, racial prejudice and opportunistic political figures rapidly took advantage of renewed hostilities toward the Chinese and they were increasingly used as replacement labourers.

Rock Springs, Wyoming was a place that has become synonymous with 19th-century labour unrest between Native, European, and Chinese workers. In 1875, the Union Pacific brought in Chinese workers as an alternative to Native and European labour. By 1879 labour relations in Rock Springs between European Americans and Chinese deteriorated and
twenty-eight Chinese workers were killed and their property destroyed. In 1882 the California State Constitution was amended to include several anti-Chinese provisions to prohibit further immigration of Chinese labourers. Finally, in 1885, the Chinese Exclusion Acts became law and opportunities for Chinese workers fell to a trickle. In combination, these institutional and market forces suggest that the net migration flow presented in Figure 1 were the result of a dynamic set of economic and social relationships that influenced the market for Chinese labour in America.

19th-century Chinese immigration to the US was the product of dynamic labour relationships that integrated to draw Chinese immigrants to America, escaping the harsh realities of 19th century China. The traditional view of Chinese sojourn labour in the 19th century American West is that the Chinese were the low-cost alternative to European and American born labour. However, the 19th-century historical processes that brought Chinese workers to America were more complex. A more complete view of Chinese sojourn labour requires an explanation of transaction costs and labour market discrimination. The turnover costs of hiring Native and European workers forced Crocker and other railroad administrators to substitute Chinese workers for Native and European labourers (Carson 101). Empirical evidence suggests that Chinese workers were found in low skill occupations given their demographics and human capital characteristics, suggesting there may have been significant segregation of Chinese workers into less desirable positions. Nevertheless, due to significant labour constraints, railroad administrators found that Chinese labour was a viable alternative to an unstable European labour force (Carson 101). Successful labour experimentation with Chinese workers on the Central Pacific Railway appears to have paved the way for further labour experiments with Asian workers on the Great Northern, Northern, and Southern Pacific Railroads. Thus, the 19th-century construction of the transcontinental railroad was the product of a complex set of institutional arrangements and market outcomes.
Annotated Bibliography


A book on the Chinese’s labour on the Transcontinental Railroad. Helped with understanding the background of my topic.


A book on the progress of the Transcontinental Railroad. Helped me begin my research on the broad story.


A book about the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Helped me understand the construction of the railroad and the people involved.


An article on the largest staged labour strike of the era. Helped with understanding the background of these Chinese Labourers.