

Melissa Li

Monumental Anti-Racism

Prof. Ward

25 April 2020

Chinese Inclusion Acts:

the Need for Representation of the Chinese Railroad Workers at Golden Spike National Park

## **INTRODUCTION**

[Anti-]Racism in the United States has been an increasingly discussed topic for it addresses not only the racial discrimination and inequality in the past, but it also provides fresh outlooks and solutions for reparations in the present and future. Monuments then become a crucial way for groups of people to contextualize and to commemorate their history and those who were involved in it. As we addressed in class, monumental [anti-]racism works to [re-]address groups of people by presenting a collective memory that was maybe once ignored or forgotten. One of these historical memories that has slowly faded out of Americans' view is the Chinese immigrant workers who worked extensively on the majority of the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860's. These workers not only represent the Chinese and Asian immigrants that came to the United States after the completion of the railroads, but they also embody the racial discrimination Chinese immigrants first faced and continue to face even today. This essay examines the history of these Chinese workers who worked on the railroads, the aftermath of the negligence of the Chinese workers, and my proposed step of change—an interactive statue built at the Golden Spike National Park—in the direction of resolution.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

In 1969, at the centennial of the “Golden Spike” ceremony for the completion of the

Transcontinental Railroads, the Secretary of Transportation John Volpe exclaimed, “Who else but Americans could build 10 miles of track in one day?” while the public was blatantly unaware of the thousands of Chinese workers who worked underpaid for 7 years (Chang 2019). This omission of these workers has been mentioned in multiple scholarly papers and research. Similarly, there has been close to no primary resource or document written by the Chinese workers that were preserved—therefore, no detailed understanding of the condition they were under. However, recent archaeological studies have revealed that being underpaid is not the sole difficulty these workers had faced. Ryan Harrod and John Crandall have co-written an essay on the condition under which the Chinese workers worked, backed up by testimonies of Chinese workers and postmortem examination of thirteen Chinese men found in Carlin, Nevada (where 25% of the Chinese population at the time were involved in railroad works), just outside of Promontory Summit in Utah. In this paper, they concluded that these workers indeed worked under the harshest environment—all the most dangerous work, such as “blasting and drilling...tunnels,” are done by Chinese people. Most of the time they are forced by their white superiors to do these jobs. Skeletal examination on the aforementioned thirteen men showed that they were also subject to “interpersonal violence,” suggesting that the possibility that they were victims of racial violence during the time the railroad was built. Relative to their European counterparts, these Chinese workers faced much more adversity, not only from the railroad work itself, but from heightened racial tension as well (Harrod & Crandall 2015).

While the Transcontinental Railroad undoubtedly set the United States up for much economic efficiency, the Chinese workers and their descendants faced another story. Because of their minority status, Chinese workers accepted whatever jobs they could find when they first emigrated from China. Because of their willingness to take on jobs with a much lower wage,

native born workers felt threatened by their presence. This tension continued to build throughout the 1870's, when urban whites organized "anticoolie clubs," aiming to remove all Chinese workers because they thought the Chinese didn't belong in the U.S. Once they realized the Chinese immigrants were able to find other job opportunities, whites then turned to violence and harassment (Fong & Markham 2002). There were multiple instances of lynching of Chinese immigrants in California around the time of the Gold Rush and the time when the Railroad was built. Racial tension was high, and with newspapers such as Los Angeles News fanning the flames, more than 500 people started a racial riot in the poorer streets of Los Angeles in 1971. Seventeen Chinese men and boys died (Wallace 2017). The anti-Chinese sentiment swelled among Americans, which eventually led to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which banned Chinese people from immigrating to the U.S. for around 60 years. This bill was historically the first every immigration law based on ethnic groups in the U.S., and was the blueprint for the many more to come.

### **Misrepresentation & Erasure**

As much as the United States have progressed as a nation since the 1980's, these Chinese workers seem to be forgotten by the public. In Chang's account of the 150th year commemoration of the "Golden Spike" ceremony in 2019, he takes notice of how there was no mention of the strikes that the Chinese workers went through to get paid, nor the "conflict, struggle, and bloodshed" upon which the Transcontinental Railroads were built (Chang 2019). Even 150 years later and counting, these workers were never properly recognized.

On the website of Golden Spike National Park where the railroad construction was finished, the first picture its audience sees is a group photograph of the completion of the railroad (Figure 1). What surprises me the most is the obvious lack of representation of Chinese workers.

Most—around 90%—of the faces in the photograph are that of white Americans. While undoubtedly the three private railroad companies that worked on the railroad were owned by white Americans, the lack of inclusion in this photo, though symbolic, is striking.



Figure 1

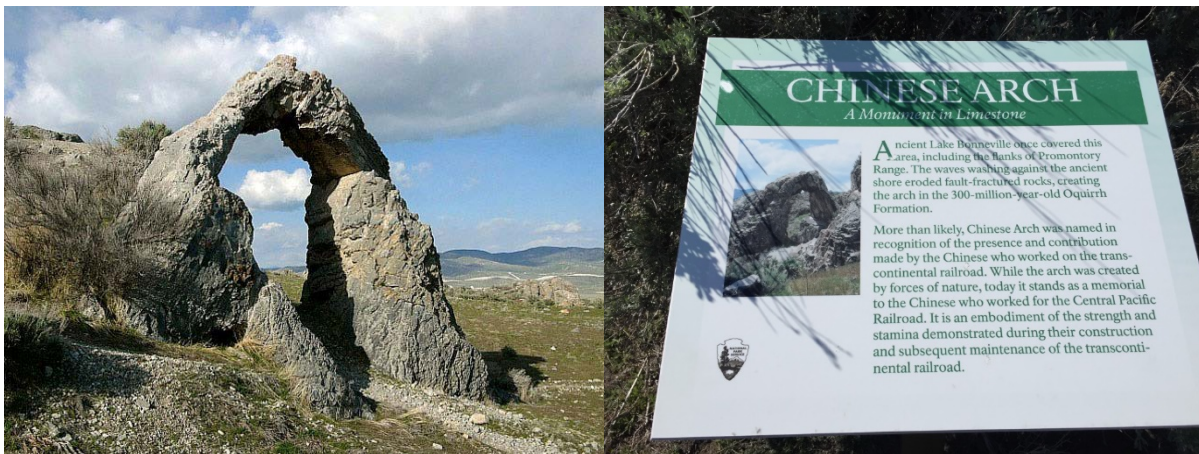


Figure 2a &amp; 2b

Then, as I navigated through the website, I found the only part of it that even mentions the Chinese workers is a small tag called “Legacy from the Far East” from a drop-down bar. The Park claims that it “strives to honor the legacy” of these workers, yet the only things close to a

proper recognition the Park pays them is a plaque, which is donated by the Chinese Historical Society of America, and the “Chinese Arch” (NPS Website 2019). The so-called Chinese Arch, as shown in Figure 2a, is a stone arch formed by forces of natural winds. A small board on the side claims that this is the “embodiment of the strength and stamina demonstrated” by the Chinese workers (Figure 2b). There are many aspects of this particular memorial that are problematic. Namely, the “Chinese Arch” is a classic example of symbolic annihilation, a concept brought up in Derek Alderman’s piece which means the failure to “represent the identities” of a specific social group (Alderman et al, 2020). In this case, the Chinese workers are simply unrepresented—this naturally formed stone arch, at the end of the day, has close to no relations with these workers. Moreover, the location of this site is a long distance away from Promontory Summit, where most visitors stop by. The location, the confusing symbolism, and the small size of the board make it difficult for visitors to notice and understand the richness and the complexity of the historical context.

The root cause that leads to this erasure of Chinese immigrants’ representation even in a context where their contributions were crucial to the development of this country can be traced to psychological factors. It appears that in the U.S., people tend to think that Asian Americans have historically faced less discrimination and hardships—which is a concept called “model minority,” meaning an expectation that a particular socially or ethnically minority group is doing better than average. However, this is not necessarily true. An article written by Zara Greenbaum for the American Psychological Association examines the accuracy of “model minority” and how it leads to anti-Asian sentiments. Greenbaum not only summarizes multiple research and concludes that “model minority” is a false perception due to the many Asian Americans that are struggling in the socioeconomic aspect, but she also restates that “model minority” does not cast

positive influences since it invokes the majority race of a country to see this specific minority as “perpetual foreigners.” This means that in the U.S., white Americans tend to see Asian-Americans as foreigners, “even [those of] second- and third-generation” are subjected to assumptions that they are not Americans (Greenbaum 2019). The lack of representation of these Chinese railroad workers is then explainable by this persistent belief that Asian Americans and their descendants cannot be truly “Americans”. Until this bias is completely solved through time and new generations of people, these Chinese immigrants should be recognized.

### **Solution**

As I researched for this project, I came across one very recent memorial that was built in order to honor the Chinese railroad workers. This is the Chinese Railroad Workers Memorial Project, founded and directed by Steven Lee, the Commissioner of Entertainment for San Francisco. It is a memorial inspired by the research done by Professor Gordon Chang from Stanford University, who I have quoted in this essay as well. The memorial was built in 2019, and it is currently placed in the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento, where the railroad work first began (Figure 3).

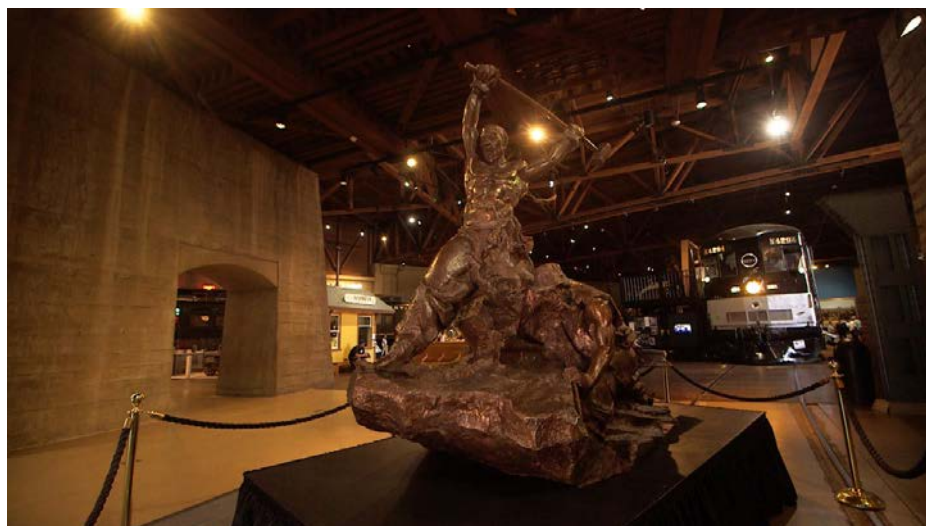


Figure 3

Fortunately, I got the chance to interview Mr. Lee over the phone to ask him the reasons behind starting this project and the pushbacks he has experienced. He decided to start this project after he learned that the only historical marker around Sacramento for the first 500 Chinese workers that were put to work was a rock placed near the Gold Run in Placer County, with a plaque explaining the contributions they have made (Figure 4). Mr. Lee felt quite disappointed, “I just wish there is a person, a picture, something—more than just a rock.” Since then, he started raising funds for this project with collaboration with the Chinese Historical Society and the U.S. Chinese Railroad Friendship Association. Eventually, they finished Phase I of the project—which is building the memorial itself and having it placed in the Railroad Museum. A Chinese blessing ceremony was conducted for the statue since in Chinese spiritual beliefs, certain spirits are trapped in a place if they are not well put to rest. “People got lost here,” Mr. Lee spoke of the Chinese workers who died and were never sent home to China, “but now they’re released.” However, Phase II—which was building a public plaza near the Gold Run and hosting the memorial there—has been put to a halt because Mr. Lee and his team are “worried about defacing and vandalism.” And with coronavirus and the current president in the office, he doesn’t think that Phase II will continue anytime soon (Lee 2020).



Figure 4



My proposed solution for the lack of recognition and representation of these Chinese workers is a monument around the Promontory Summit in Utah where the final spike was driven into the ground 150 years ago. And with the concerns that Mr. Lee has spoken to me about, this project is mostly idealized since the current political climate does not allow me to have much confidence that this memorial can be feasible. As aforementioned, it would require time and new generations to rid of the “perpetual foreigner” bias. Therefore, my design should be considered with a grain of salt.

I intend to have this monument as a wound dressing piece, which is meant for grounds that have historically faced “physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social drama.” (Alderman et al, 2020). This is mostly self-explanatory since not only did the Chinese workers faced little to zero recognition, but also because they faced discrimination and violence. This is especially urgent in the status quo because of the President’s racist rhetoric and the anti-Chinese American sentiment due to the coronavirus. With the goal of dressing this wound of racist history, I came up with two drafts before the final design (Figure 5a & 5b).

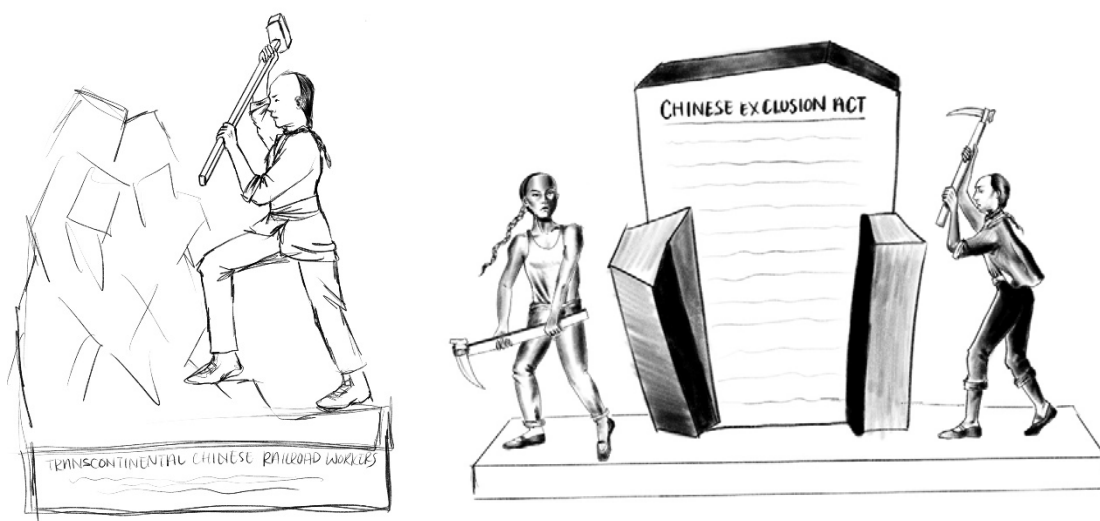


Figure 5a & 5b



The first design was a general idea as to how the worker figures will look. However, it wasn't captivating enough. The second design lacked the interactive element, and the sole title of "Chinese Exclusion Act" is very narrow since the policy itself was not the only discrimination Chinese-Americans received. Eventually, the final design was made as shown in Figure 6.

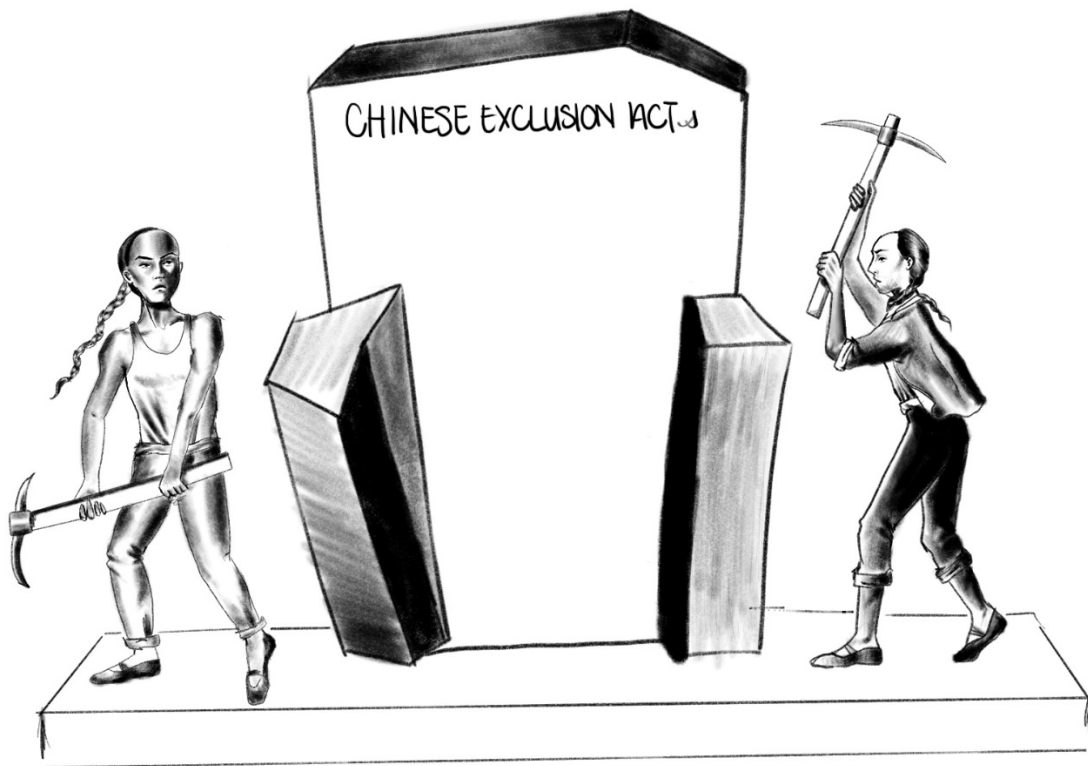


Figure 6

This design is made up of two statues of Chinese workers holding pickaxes and a slab of stone that has CHINESE EXCLUSION ACTs engraved on it, surrounded by natural rocks. There will be chalk provided on the side for the visitors to scribble policies, events, or even personal experiences on both the front and the back of the stone slab that they think are anti-Chinese American. The dimensions of this memorial as a whole would be 15 feet in length, 3 feet in width, and 10 feet in height, making the worker statues about 5'5".

The symbolism of this memorial is the process of breaking "Chinese Exclusion Acts"—

including but not limited to the actual Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The stone slab is seen as an obstacle, similar to the mountains that the Chinese workers once trudged through, that needs to be conquered. With the chance to write on the stone slab, the visitors can contribute to the process of ridding the racial bias symbolically. I believe this interactive element is crucial to making the point that only with contribution from each and one of us, can racial inequality be eradicated. Furthermore, if the memorial does get vandalized, the message of it will still be present, if not magnified—the defacing marks themselves are a “Chinese exclusion act,” adding a performative feature to the memorial.

The placement of this memorial, ideally, would be right by the path where the visitors walk to see the Golden Spike ceremony reenactment (Figure 7a). This placement of an obstacle-like statue puts pressure onto the visitors to consider the feeling the railroad workers once felt—only through passing by the obstacles can they reach the final spike. Figure 7b is another reference to where the memorial will be positioned. Of course, the visitors can choose whether they would like to partake in the process of scribbling on the memorial or not. Because there are a lot of education opportunities at Promontory Summit, with the establishment of this memorial, ideally school children would learn about this forgotten history as well.



Figure 7a & 7b

## CONCLUSION

Through extensive research on the historical evidence and the current misrepresentation and erasure of the Chinese railroad workers, I found that it is not only appropriate to propose a memorial for the forgotten contributors of the Transcontinental Railroad, but that it is also necessary. Its urgency is especially prominent in the present day because of the building of racial tension toward Chinese-Americans since the current President took office, and it seems as though it now is at its apex due to coronavirus. Despite the idealistic aspect of this proposal, this country would never be truly united as one unless the past is recognized and reconciled with. And the proposed memorial, is a gateway to a just future for Chinese-Americans, by breaking down the obstacles created in the past.

## Works Cited

- "A Legacy from the Far East." National Parks Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, [www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/a-legacy-from-the-far-east.htm](http://www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/a-legacy-from-the-far-east.htm).
- Alderman, Derek H., et al. "Memorials and Monuments." *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, vol. 9, 2020, pp. 39–47., doi:10.1016/b978-0-08-102295-5.10201-x.
- Chang, Gordon H. "A Note for History." *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 45, no. 1, Apr. 2019, pp. 3–5. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/00447471.2019.1627115.
- Fong, Eric W., and William T. Markham. "Anti-Chinese Politics in California in the 1870s: An Intercounty Analysis." *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2002, pp. 183–210. *ProQuest*, <http://libproxy.wustl.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/213990185?accountid=15159>, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.wustl.edu/10.1525/sop.2002.45.2.183>.
- Greenbaum, Zara. "Countering Stereotypes about Asian Americans." *Countering Stereotypes of Asian Americans*, American Psychological Association, 1 Dec. 2019, [www.apa.org/monitor/2019/12/countering-stereotypes](http://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/12/countering-stereotypes).
- Harrod, Ryan P., and John J. Crandall. "Rails Built of the Ancestors' Bones: The Bioarchaeology of the Overseas Chinese Experience." *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 49, no. 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 148–161. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1007/BF03376965.
- Lee, Steven. Personal Interview. 19 Apr. 2020.
- Wallace, Kelly. "Forgotten Los Angeles History: The Chinese Massacre of 1871." *Forgotten Los Angeles History: The Chinese Massacre of 1871*, 19 May 2017, [www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/chinese-massacre-1871](http://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/chinese-massacre-1871).