

Original Paper

The Forgotten Chinese Railway Laborers—A Historical
Reflection and Contemporary Perspective on the Construction of
the Canadian Pacific Railway

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Abstract

In order to contribute to Canadian railway construction, Chinese constructive laborers endured immense hardships and sacrifice, but they were forced to face systematic neglect in historical records and societal recognition. This paper aims to explore the background of Chinese laborers' involvement in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the unfair treatments they had endured. As a matter of fact, Canadian Pacific Railway holds a pivotal position in Canadian history, serving as a vital link connecting the country's east and west coasts and driving national unity and economic development. However, the underlying causes of such treatment, and the contemporary rediscovery and redress of this historical fact.

Keywords

Canadian Pacific Railway, Chinese laborers, racial discrimination, redress

1. Introduction

“Ned, where are the coolies in your poetry? Where are the thousands of Chinese workers who swung pickaxes by hand in temperatures as low as minus 40 degrees?” Canadian poet F.R. Scott criticized Canada's historical neglect of Chinese laborers' contributions to the railway in the poem titled “All the Nails but the Last”. This article aims to continuously explore the concrete role of Chinese laborers in

railway construction, analyze the reasons for their neglect, and reflect on the lessons this historical injustice offers us.

2. The Background of Chinese Laborers in Railway Construction

In the late 19th century, the Canadian federal government decided to build a transcontinental railway to promote western development and economic integration. Due to labor shortages, railway companies recruited a large number of Chinese laborers from China. Between 1881 and 1885, over 17,000 Chinese workers came to Canada, with approximately 4,000 dying due to harsh working conditions, accidents, and illnesses (source: China News Network). Despite their sacrifices and contributions being crucial, they were long overlooked in the historical narrative following the railway's completion and even faced racial discrimination and exclusion.

3. The Neglect and Exploitation Faced by Chinese Laborers in the Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway

3.1 The High-Risk Work and Harsh Living Conditions Endured by Chinese Laborers

The 615-kilometer stretch between Port Moody and Eagle Pass along the Fraser River Valley in British Columbia was the most perilous section of the entire railway. Chinese laborers were assigned the most dangerous tasks, such as blasting mountains, digging tunnels, and handling explosives; on average, four Chinese laborers perished per kilometer of railway constructed. Although their living camps could accommodate thousands of people and featured Chinese-owned stores and barber shops, records of their personal experiences and living conditions are scarce, and most were not written by the laborers themselves.

3.2 Unfair Treatment of Chinese Laborers

Economically, Chinese laborers earned a monthly wage of 30-40 Canadian dollars, which was lower than that of white railway workers (white laborers earned 1.5-3 times as much), and they were required to purchase daily necessities and work supplies at inflated prices from company stores.

Socially, Chinese laborers faced significant discrimination. Before and after the railway construction, numerous proposals were made to restrict Chinese immigration, limit their rights, and curtail their economic participation, with some being enacted. For example, the 1872 British Columbia Voter Eligibility Act (commonly known as the British Columbia Voter Eligibility Act) stripped Chinese and Indigenous peoples of their voting rights. It was a landmark piece of racist legislation passed by the colonial (and shortly after Confederation) government of British Columbia, Canada. It systematically stripped Chinese and Indigenous peoples of their voting rights, establishing a legal framework for racial discrimination that would last for over seven decades.

The Act was passed just one year after British Columbia joined the Canadian Confederation (1871). At the time, BC's population was racially diverse, with a minority white population. Superficially, the Act seemed to expand voting rights by removing previous property and literacy requirements. However, this expansion was intended only for white men. The Act contained a special clause (Section 13) that explicitly stated: "Nothing in this Act shall be construed to extend to, include, or in any way apply to Chinamen or Indians". It possesses a series of strong underlying motives for the aspects of economic competition & racial anxiety: in view of economic competition – White laborers feared that Chinese workers, who were willing to work for lower wages in dangerous jobs such as railroads, mining, canneries would eventually "steal" jobs and drive down wages. By removing Chinese voting rights, white workers ensured that Chinese immigrants had no political voice to defend their interests. Racial superiority & anxiety – During parliamentary debates, one MLA openly stated his fear that after the next election, "we might see an Indian in the Speaker's chair, or a Chinaman occupying a majority of the seats". This reflects a deep-seated refusal to accept non-whites as political equals.

Especially after the railway was completed in 1885, Chinese laborers not only failed to receive the recognition they deserved but became the specific victims of racial discrimination. The Canadian government passed the Chinese Immigration Act in the same year, imposing a "head tax" on Chinese immigrants and restricting Chinese immigration. According to the act, each new Chinese immigrant was required to pay an additional 50 Canadian dollars as a head tax. In 1891, this tax was increased to 100 Canadian dollars, and two years later, it surged to 500 Canadian dollars. This amount was equivalent to two years' wages for a worker at the time, and according to the prices of the era, such amount of finance could support to purchase two houses in Vancouver. This act exerted the great influence on the Chinese laborers in view of separation of family members. The \$50 head tax (later raised to \$100, then \$500) was unaffordable for most laborers. Consequently, Chinese men came alone, leaving wives and children behind in China. Many never realized the reunification, thus creating a generation of "split families" and a "bachelor society" in Canada. Besides, the economic exploitation between 1885-1923 collected roughly \$23 million CAD (in historical value) from about 82,000 Chinese immigrants. This was a form of state-sanctioned extortion, as Chinese laborers had just built the transcontinental railway yet were punished for coming. It also caused great social isolation since without families, Chinese immigrants lived in crowded, segregated neighborhoods. Many died alone, unable to return to China and they could not be recognized from the beginning to the ending of their life, since most of their graves and in Canadian cemeteries were marked with dehumanizing labels like "Coolie No. X". Despite these harsh measures, they failed to effectively deter Chinese immigration to Canada. As a result, in 1923, the federal government enacted a new Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting nearly all Chinese immigration to Canada, effectively closing the door to Chinese immigration.

4. Major Reasons Behind the Neglect of Chinese Laborers

4.1 Racial Discrimination and Social Prejudice

Due to the prevailing ideology of white supremacy, racial discrimination against Asian immigrants was widespread in Canadian society at the end of the 19th century. Chinese laborers were viewed as “cheap labor” rather than equal contributors to society. The mainstream white community regarded Chinese as an “inferior race”, and their contributions were naturally overlooked. Additionally, most Chinese laborers came from rural areas in Guangdong, China, where language barriers and cultural differences led to isolation from white communities, making their voices and stories difficult to document and disseminate.

4.2 Victims of Political and Labor Conflicts

White labor groups (such as Irish workers) believed that Chinese laborers were driving down wages and taking away job opportunities, leading to their active exclusion. To appease white voters, the government also downplayed the role of Chinese laborers. After the railway was completed, the Canadian government immediately enacted the “head tax” law to restrict Chinese immigration, reflecting official discrimination against Chinese laborers. This policy further exacerbated societal neglect of their contributions.

4.3 The “Invisibility” of Their Work

Chinese laborers were assigned to the most dangerous and harshest construction sections, such as the Rocky Mountains, where they performed high-risk tasks like blasting and tunnel excavation. However, these sacrifices were not publicly commemorated and were even deliberately erased from records. In railway company and official historical materials, Chinese laborers were often reduced to mere “labor statistics”, while the names of white engineers and managers were meticulously documented. For example, in the 1885 completion ceremony photograph, there is not a single Chinese face appearing. For example, the “Last Spike” Ceremony, which was exerted on November 7, 1885, at Craigellachie, by British Columbia, CPR officials and company executives. A photograph was taken of the occasion, showing a crowd of well-dressed officials and white workers. However, there was no single Chinese laborer present. Neither any one Chinese face appears in the historic photograph.

4.4 Power Imbalance in Historical Narratives

Early Canadian historical narratives were dominated by white elites, emphasizing the “heroism of nation-building”, while Chinese laborers were viewed as tools rather than participants. Since most Chinese laborers were illiterate or left no written records, their experiences relied on third-party accounts (typically from employers or hostile groups), resulting in a biased perspective.

From Confederation in 1867 through the early twentieth century, Canadian history was written almost exclusively by white political and economic elites. Their central story was one of “nation-building heroism”-the triumph of visionaries like Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, railway barons like

Donald Smith, and brave white workers who supposedly tamed the wilderness. In this triumphalist narrative, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was celebrated as the steel thread that bound a fragile nation together—a monument to “Canadian nationalism or culture”. Within this framework, Chinese laborers were reduced to mere tool—a faceless, interchangeable source of cheap muscle. One academic analysis observes that their “contemporary memorialization largely frames them in terms of national history”, which “obscures how their lives unfolded in a transnational life world”’s shaped by capitalism, colonialism, and racialisation. They were not treated as participants with agency, stories, or families, but as an abstract “labour force”—a statistic to be deployed and discarded. The erasure of Chinese laborers cannot be understood without recognizing that anti-Chinese racism was built into the very structure of Canadian settler colonialism.

Scholars have demonstrated that from the 1850s onward, European colonizers systematically positioned Chinese people as “aliens who do not belong”—threats to white control over land and resources—despite the fact that Chinese migrants arrived in British Columbia at the same time as Europeans. Chinese workers occupied a paradoxical position: they were “settlers without settler-hood” —essential to the colonial economy but permanently excluded from the rights and recognition of true “settlers”.

4.5 Deliberate Concealment of Economic Interests

Railroad companies (such as CPR President William Van Horn) publicly denigrated Chinese laborers, labeling them “weak and inefficient”, to justify reducing wages and benefits, avoid public criticism, and use Chinese laborers as tools to lower the original costs. After Chinese laborers died, companies often refused to pay compensation or funeral expenses, concealed the number of accidents to maintain their image, and avoided liability for compensation.

The railroad executives, including CPR President Sir William Cornelius Van Horne, publicly downplayed the capabilities of Chinese laborers while privately depending on them. Van Horne himself acknowledged the indispensability of Chinese labor. He once declared the necessity of Chinese workers in view of construction work for “the work has been well done in every way”. The very revealing expression was his pragmatic admission: “It is simply a question of alternatives, either you must have this labor, or you can’t have the railway”. The most brutal manifestation of this exploitation came after death. When Chinese laborers were killed due to certain reasons like explosions, tunnel collapses, landslides, or disease, they would not gain any compensation.

5. The Rediscovery of Chinese Laborers’ History and Efforts to Exonerate Them

5.1 Official Apology and Compensation

The Chinese community in Canada has long fought for the government to acknowledge its discriminatory policies in the past, especially the “head tax” and the Chinese Exclusion Act targeting

Chinese laborers. In January 2005, Prime Minister Paul Martin became the first sitting prime minister to apologize via Chinese media, stating “I apologize” for the discriminatory policies, though a formal parliamentary apology was actually delayed. In addition, On June 22, 2006, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered a formal apology in Parliament, which included: Acknowledging the systematic discrimination against Chinese Canadians from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, including the unfair treatment of Chinese railway workers. Harper began with an unprecedented gesture, speaking the first phrase of his apology in Cantonese Chinese: “Gar nar dai doe heem” (We apologize). He then declared: “On behalf of the people and Government of Canada, we offer a full apology to Chinese Canadians for the head tax and express our deepest sorrow for the subsequent exclusion of Chinese immigrants”.

In addition to the announcement of compensation, Prime Minister Harper also announces compensation payments of CAD 20,000 each to surviving head tax payers or their widows, totaling approximately CAD 20 million. Establishing the “Community Historical Recognition Program” to provide funding support for related educational projects. Although such amount of compensation deserves applauding, the compensation package fell short of demands from some redress activists. Notably, descendants—children and grandchildren of head tax payers—were excluded from compensation and such exclusion generated ongoing criticism and continued campaigns for broader redress. The children “were greatly harmed” by family separation and poverty, but received no direct compensation from the government.

5.2 BC Provincial Government's Additional Apology in 2014

On May 15, 2014, the very first time in history, a Canadian provincial government formally acknowledged and apologized for its own century-long legacy of anti-Chinese legislation. Unlike the 2006 federal apology, which focused primarily on the Chinese Head Tax, BC's apology cast a much wider net, encompassing over 100 provincial laws, regulations, and policies that systematically discriminated against Chinese Canadians from 1871 to 1947. BC Premier Christy Clark apologized in the provincial legislature: Acknowledged BC's historical anti-Chinese discriminatory policies, including the denial of voting rights to Chinese laborers and restrictions on employment. Committed to incorporating the history of Chinese laborers into school curricula and funding related commemorative projects.

However, such an apology demonstrates several aspects of restrictions over discrimination categories in view of political rights, property rights, employment, education and health & housing. In terms of political rights, it aims to limit the denial of the right to vote (provincial, municipal, and school board elections), prohibition from holding public office, and exclusion from jury duty; denial of the right to own property or land; in view of employment, it imposes labour and employment restrictions, barred from professional occupations (including law, pharmacy, notary public) because these required voter

registration; restricted access to public education, and segregation of schooling systems; subjected to health and housing segregation, including racially segregated hospital wards and cemetery sections.

5.3 Historical Research and Archive Disclosure

Here shows a stark transformation from the “indispensable enemy” to “pioneers of nation building” since over a century, the image of Chinese railway workers in Canadian society presented two completed faces. Several researchers focus their research on the digging out the contribution done by Chinese workers. Anthony B. Chan (1944-2018) was actively engaged with the primary archival sources and his work helped to lay the groundwork for the canon of Chinese Canadian historiography. His scholarship was instrumental in demonstrating that Chinese workers were not passive victims but active agents whose labor was essential to Canada’s transcontinental vision—a reality that the government simultaneously depended on and denied. Besides, Paul Yee worked as an archivist at the City of Vancouver Archives (1979-1987) and the Archives of Ontario (1988-1991). This archival background gave him direct access to primary source materials, enabling him to reconstruct the lives of Chinese railway workers with a level of detail previously absent from official narratives. Patricia E. Roy focuses her research on the “necessity of importing Chinese laborers to construct the railway in British Columbia. In view of culture demonstration, Edgar Wickberg edited the landmark volume *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (1982) a work produced through the Multiculturalism Project and in collaboration with four other researchers.

Also, some representative research findings deserve our attention. At least 15,000-17,000 Chinese laborers participated in railway construction (accounting for approximately 60% of the total workforce). At least 600-1,000 Chinese laborers died (due to explosions, falls, diseases, etc.), but the company failed to properly record or compensate them. In the 21st century, the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) gradually made public the Pacific Railway Company’s payroll records, contracts, and other documents, confirming the unequal treatment suffered by Chinese laborers (such as wages being only half that of white workers).

5.4 Commemorative activities and public education

The Monuments and museum exhibitions perform as the typical representatives. Vancouver Chinese Laborers Memorial (1988) is located in Chinatown, which is inscribed with “In memory of the Chinese laborers who gave their lives for the construction of the Canadian railway”. Toronto Railway Chinese Laborers Memorial Plaque (1989), established by the Ontario provincial government, acknowledges the sacrifices of Chinese laborers. In addition, Canadian History Museum (2019) adds a Pacific Railway Chinese Laborers exhibition area, showcasing tools, photographs, and other artifacts.

Since the memorials and exhibitions are typical representatives, they embody the strong significance. Before the Canadian government issued its formal apology in 2006, official memory of the Chinese laborers’ contribution and the subsequent discriminatory policies was largely absent from the national

narrative. It was the Chinese-Canadian community itself that first insisted on making history visible, using stone, bronze, and curated spaces to assert a truth that had be deliberately forgotten. Monuments and museum exhibitions became the most powerful, enduring, and public forms of witness. Different from the speeches or temporary events, a grand monument stands year after year, silently demanding recognition. Also, they provide a place to lay wreaths, hold vigils, and teach younger generations. Besides, the carved words and curated artifacts make an undeniable historical claim to each passers-by to think over and reflect over the past.

5.5 Inclusion in School Education

Since 2015, British Columbia has included “The History of Chinese Laborers on the Railway” into its elementary and secondary school curricula, emphasizing their importance to Canada’s founding. A dedicated teaching material titled “Bamboo Shoots: Chinese Canadian Legacies in BC” was developed at a high cost and officially launched on September 11, 2015, since when, it has been institutionalized in British Columbia’s school curriculum. In 2021, Ontario passed a bill designating May 10 as “Chinese Laborers on the Railway Memorial Day”. It focuses on the reasons for Chinese immigration, the hardships faced and their contributions to BC and Canada. Provides a deeper exploration of the history of Chinese railroad workers and the broader context of racial discrimination against ethnic minorities in Canada. Education is positioned as a powerful tool to eliminate racism by ensuring future generations understand this history to prevent its repetition.

5.6 Cultural Works and Public Awareness

A series of cultural works represented by documentaries and non-fiction literature have come out to the public. For example, *Gold Mountain Dream* tells the stories of Chinese laborers. It realizes capturing the vanishing oral record: By the late 20th century, very few of the original railroad workers were still alive. Filmmakers and historians raced to record interviews with the last survivors and their direct descendants. The Camera captures not just words but the tremor in an elderly man’s voice as he recalls his father’s stories of dynamite explosions in the Frazer Canyon, the homemade meals shared in cramped bunkhouses.

Works such as *Ghost Train* by Paul Yee and *The Railway* as children’s picture book spread history to younger generations. Published in 1996 and illustrated by Harvey Chan, *Ghost Train* won the Governor General’s Literary Award and has since become a touchstone in Canadian children’s literature. It epitomizes how narrative art can make an overwhelmingly tragic history accessible to young minds. *The Railway* consists of many aspects of intellectual truth: the dates, the policies, the names, and the societal context. It affirms the feelings stirred by the fictional story with documentary evidence.

5.7 Continued Advocacy by the Chinese Community

Some of the equal rights organizations have been established: Organizations such as the Canadian Chinese National Council (CCNC) and the Canadian Chinese Museum Foundation have been lobbying

the government for years to ensure fair treatment of history. Legal Proceedings: in 2001, thousands of victims of the “head tax” and their descendants filed a class-action lawsuit with the Superior Court of Ontario, Canada, demanding that the Canadian government make a public apology and offer compensation.

Although most of this history has now been acknowledged, we still face many challenges. For example, some historical details remain under-researched (such as the specific list of deceased Chinese laborers). Anti-Asian discrimination persists in contemporary society, necessitating ongoing education. The exoneration of Chinese laborers is not only about correcting historical errors but also serves as a reminder to Canadian society that the nation’s prosperity is built on the collective efforts of diverse ethnic groups. Their stories have finally transitioned from being “forgotten” to being “remembered”.

6. Conclusion

The experiences of Chinese laborers during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway are a history filled with suffering and injustice. They contributed their sweat and lives to Canada’s national development under extremely harsh conditions, yet they were long neglected and discriminated against. In recent years, with the deepening of historical research and the promotion of social justice movements, the contributions of Chinese laborers have gradually been recognized. However, true reconciliation still requires sustained efforts, including broader historical education, cultural commemoration, and policy support. The story of the Chinese laborers is not only a part of Canadian history but also an important case study in global labor rights and immigrant justice.

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Notes

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