
Sample Lesson 16: Chinese Railroad Workers

Theme: Systems of Power

Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 2, 4

Standards Alignment:

HSS Analysis Skills (9–12): Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View 2; Historical Interpretation 1

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 2, 6, 9, SL.9–10.1.A, 1.B, 1.C

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

The contributions of people of color to the economic development and infrastructure of the United States are too often minimized or overlooked. Chinese Americans are Americans and have played a key role in building this country. Had it not been for this workforce, one of the greatest engineering feats of the nineteenth century (the first transcontinental railroad and others that followed), would not have been achieved within the allotted timeline. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) have played an integral part as active labor organizers and strikers throughout history to fight racism and exploitation. A popular image of the transcontinental railroad meeting at Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869, with no Chinese workers exemplifies the conscious refusal to recognize the contributions of AAPI workers.

Key Terms and Concepts: systems of power, assimilate, transcontinental, Central Pacific Railroad Company, congenial, amassed, worker exploitation

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Understand how Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have been active labor organizers and strikers throughout history to fight racism and exploitation
- Develop an appreciation for the contributions of Chinese Americans to US history and infrastructure
- Develop their speaking skills through a Socratic seminar discussion

Essential Questions:

1. How have AAPIs responded to repressive conditions in US history?
2. What role have AAPIs played in the labor movement?

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3. Why is it important to recognize the contributions of immigrant labor in building the wealth of the United States?
 4. Why is it important to remember the Chinese Railroad Strike?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Overview:

Day 1 – Transcontinental Railroads and Chinese Immigration

Day 2 – Chinese Labor and the Building of the Transcontinental Railroads

Day 3 – Commemoration of the Golden Spike

Detailed Daily Lesson Procedures

Day 1 – Transcontinental Railroads and Chinese Immigration

1. Post an image of a Chinese railroad worker on the screen.
 - a. Ask students to estimate when the photo was taken, who is shown in the photo, and what historical event or events they think are connected to the photograph.
 - b. Ask students what they know about Chinese Americans and their contributions to the US.
2. Introduce the lesson with the following key overarching questions:
 - a. To what extent did immigrant labor contribute to building the wealth of the US?
 - b. To what extent did those laborers benefit from the wealth they helped build?
3. Read “The Chinese Experience in 19th Century America – Background for Teachers” and the “Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project” at Stanford University.
 - a. Have students read in pairs using any reading strategy for the level of the class (annotation, marking the text, Cornell notes, choral reading, etc.).
 - b. Have students respond to the Key Questions and answer the questions on Handout A (located at the end of the lesson).

Day 2 – Chinese Labor and the Building of the Transcontinental Railroads

1. Discuss the answers to the questions students have completed and do the following:
 - a. Ask students: To what extent have Chinese railroad workers been given the appropriate historical acknowledgment for their contribution to the building of the railroad system?
 - b. Have students look up “transcontinental railroad” in the index of their US history textbook and look for text on Chinese laborers.
2. Show on the screen the image of the May 10, 1869, Promontory Summit celebration.
3. Have students analyze the photograph.
 - a. Who is featured in the photo? Where and when was the photo taken? Why was the photo taken?
 - b. Who is not featured in the photo? Why do you think that is?
4. Show the Chinese Historical Society of America “CHSA Tribute to the Chinese Railroad Workers” video (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link154>). Tell students to pay special attention to Connie Young Yu’s interview from 1:59 to 2:31. The whole video is 5:31 minutes.
5. Provide students time to reflect on what they have seen in the video by having them complete a five-minute free write brainstorm on the following questions: Based on the interviews in the video, why is it important to recognize the contributions of Chinese laborers? Why is that recognition meaningful to people within the Chinese American community? How does the exclusion of Chinese and Chinese American contributions to the United States, including the railroad, affect our understanding of history?
6. After students have completed their free write, have them assemble in pairs or groups of three and share their responses with one another. When the discussion begins to wind down, have the class reconvene as a whole group. Have students share their thoughts and ideas with the class.
7. Tell students that the video they just watched shows the importance of recognizing the contributions of Chinese laborers more than one hundred years after the building of the railroad. Ask students these final questions: How do you think Chinese laborers and Chinese immigrants were treated at the time? Provide students with copies of excerpts from David Phillips’s discussion of “The Chinese Question” in his Letters from California (pages 120–123) and “Enactments So Utterly Un-American” from Granite Crag by Constance

Frederica Gordon-Cumming (pages 253–255). As students read, have them identify the conflicting attitudes toward the presence of Chinese laborers in California, noting the arguments presented for the exclusion and inclusion of Chinese laborers.

8. After students have read the document excerpts, explain to them that the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Have students look up this event in their textbooks and discuss with a partner whether or not they think the information provided is satisfactory. Have students come up with a list of questions they have about the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Day 3 – Taking Action

Every year on May 10, the Golden Spike Foundation commemorates the coming together of the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad to create the first transcontinental railroad. Until recently, there has been little to no representation of the Chinese laborers who built the Central Pacific Railroad.

1. Show “The Work of Giants” video (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link155>). Ask students to focus on the contributions and hardships experienced by Chinese laborers while building through the Sierras.
2. Split students into groups and have them brainstorm a list of ways that the Golden Spike Foundation can further recognize the contributions of Chinese laborers and how they can increase awareness of their contributions. Then instruct students to do the following:

Compose a professional, persuasive letter to the commemoration committee that explains why the Chinese contributions to the railroad should be recognized and how that can be achieved, including concrete information from the resources examined over the course of the lesson and specific quotes and examples.

Address your letter to Golden Spike Foundation, 60 South 600 East, Suite 150, Salt Lake City, Utah 84102.

Materials and Resources:

- NBC News “150 Years Ago, Chinese Railroad Workers Staged the Era’s Largest Labor Strike,” June 21, 2017 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link156>
- University of Illinois “The Chinese Experience in 19th Century America – Background for Teachers” <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link157>

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- Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University, Key Questions <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link158>
 - The Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project Exhibit: This exhibit from Stanford University contains interviews, historical documents, and artifacts. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link159>
 - Chinese Historical Society of America “CHSA Tribute to the Chinese Railroad Workers” video (from 1:59 to 2:31 Connie Young Yu describes how Chinese railroad workers are not recognized at the 100th anniversary of the transcontinental railroad on May 10 at Promontory Point) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link160>
 - Image of the celebration of the final golden spike being pounded into the track at Promontory Summit where the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads met to create the transcontinental railroad. (No Chinese laborers are in the picture.)
 - “Enactments So Utterly Un-American,” from *Granite Crags* by Constance Frederica Gordon-Cumming (pages 253–255) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link161>
 - David Phillips, *Letters from California* (pages 120–123) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link162>
 - “The Work of Giants” (Chinese workers building a tunnel through the Sierras) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link163>

Other sources:

- William F. Chew. 2004. *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad*. Trafford Publishing.
- Stanford University Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link164>
- Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, eds. 2019. *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link165>
- CBS Sunday Morning “Building the Transcontinental Railroad”: This video covers the 150th anniversary of the transcontinental railroad and highlights the Chinese labor force. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link166>

Transcontinental Railroad and Chinese Immigration

Read “The Chinese Experience in 19th Century America – Background for Teachers,”
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link167>

Answer the questions below:

1. When did the Chinese first start emigrating to the US?
2. What were the push factors (conditions in China that pushed Chinese out) for Chinese immigrating to the US in the 1800s?
3. What were the pull factors (conditions in the US the pulled Chinese in)?

Use this source to answer the questions below:

Read the Key Questions section at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link168>
(Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University).

1. Explain why and how Chinese were sought after to come to the US to build the transcontinental railroad.
2. Describe the types of repression and discrimination Chinese railroad workers endured under the railroad companies’ management.
3. Identify the key details of the Chinese railroad strike that occurred in 1867.
4. Identify the strikers’ demands.
5. To what extent was the strike a success?