

## Chinese Railroad Workers

You've been working on the railroad  
Your lifelong days (1)

Speak slow, Steady hands move at a pace  
Hearts heavy, can barely stand running the race  
Yellow peril (2), they called you burden by hate  
Disliking face, you followed with faith

From the Guangdong Canton province (3), high stakes  
1850, was told mountains of gold await  
Long and behold, transcontinental railroad (4)  
Opportunity from the Sierra Nevada Mountains break

From the Great Wall you stand tall, struggle with grace  
The Irish three dollars to your dollar a day (5)  
Hard work breaking the earth for paths laid  
Go deep underground blasts when others afraid

But you're not, focused on these here rocks (6)  
A chain gang to maintain and sustain these hard knocks

When immigrants were treated no different from slaves  
Here you are, just so they could travel away

You work and push every day  
Dynamite, earth will break  
Flash lights, it's life  
Is this life, these are the breaks

15020,000 workers Lincoln green light lanes  
Where 30 million buffalo roam the Great Plains (7)  
Through the Sierra Nevada, industrial highway  
Six months to cross, because of you it took six days

18,000 mile journey (8) around South America sail  
Or loaded wagons endangered personnel, well  
Ambitious souls, travel roads  
And if nature says no paths  
Create your own

From the east coast to west coast, Cali Gold Rush  
Celestial spirit calm, when they push  
Even through the ten mile day  
You worked and slaved  
To increase efforts for the rails you laid

Now if that don't demand appreciation  
Conversations, reparations  
You build this nation  
Along with the blacks, breaking your back  
For railroad tracks, some hard facts

You work and push every day  
Dynamite, earth will break  
Flash lights, its life  
Is this life, these are the breaks

You've been working on the railroad  
Your lifelong days  
California sun  
California rush  
And you we thank

## Notes

- 1) **working:** A huge portion of the laborers working on the US railroads in the mid-19th century were Chinese. There was a sizeable population of Chinese immigrants living in California during this time, and these immigrants played a substantial role in developing early US railroad systems.
- 2) **Yellow Peril:** This refers to a racist metaphor that historically aimed to portray East Asian people as a danger or threat to the Western world.
- 3) **Guangdong Canton province:** Many Chinese railroad workers came from this province, one that was suffering from widespread poverty and civil unrest at the time. Its closeness to Hong Kong led many workers to board ships and depart for California in hopes of supporting their families.

- 4) **Transcontinental Railroad**: This railroad, completed in 1869, was the first to connect the eastern and western United States. It was the project of the Union Pacific (east) and the Central Pacific (west) railroads.
- 5) **Irish**: Irish immigrants represented one of the main ethnic groups working to build the Union Pacific railroad.
- 6) **rocks**: The Chinese used hundreds of kegs of explosive powder to blast rocks and other obstructions to clear a path for the railroad, including building tunnels in mountains.
- 7) **Great Plains**: A vast area of the country once inhabited by very few was connected, resulting in a growth in population, industry and commerce, all as a result of the incredible productivity and ingenuity of Chinese-American railroad workers.
- 8) **journey**: The length and scope of Chinese workers' journey to California was beyond what many can imagine. Traveling for weeks and months around Africa and South America to reach their final destination, many workers journeyed more than halfway around the earth in order to find work.

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