Jie Wei Zhou
Chinese American, born 1962

Dragon Parade
2012
Oil on linen

Here, the Lunar New Year celebration is underway in San Francisco in 1904, a Year of the Dragon in the Chinese zodiac. The dragon parade showers the crowd with luck for the coming year. Dancers work as a team to bring the handmade dragon to life by raising and lowering the support poles to the rhythm of loud cymbals and drums. Choreography often includes running in spiral formations to make the dragon turn and twist on itself, causing the performers to jump over or around the body. Zhou created this painting in 2012, a recent Year of the Dragon.

The dragon has long been a powerful and auspicious symbol in Chinese folklore. Legend has it that its supernatural forces can grant blessings, offer protection, and even influence weather. Chinese emperors were said to have descended from these creatures.

Dragon Parade, Oakland, California, 1907. Courtesy of Chinese Historical Society of America


1898

Jie Wei Zhou
Chinese American, born 1962

The Good Team
2009
Oil on linen

The artist states, "This painting was inspired by my visit to the National Museum of History in Washington, D.C. The artifacts, stories and photographs opened my eyes to the inspiring history of early Chinese immigrants. One of the narratives that I was particularly drawn to was of a Chinese shoe repairer. This painting brings the viewer back to 1898, and the poster of the Statue of Liberty hints at the themes of immigration and freedom. The scene focuses on the father-son relationship as they work together at the family business. I tried to capture the human spirit and bring to life this mundane but intimate moment filled with patience and teamwork. The unity, mutual respect and cooperation between family members expressed here are the values that I grew up around and that are core to traditional Chinese culture."

Colored postcard image of a Chinatown street cobbler, based on a photograph by Charles Weidner (1867–1940).


堂參首
省藥

Mian Situ
Chinese American, born 1953

Toy Peddler of Dupont Street, San Francisco Chinatown, 1905
2011
Oil on canvas

This richly toned oil painting presents an idealized perspective of a festival day. It was likely influenced by black and white photographs of Chinatown taken by German American photographer Arnold Genthe around 1900. When describing this scene, Situ stated, "Dupont Street, before the earthquake and fire, was the heart of Chinatown. Just as Chinese street merchants would venture throughout the city, others would come to Chinatown to ply their wares. And no one drew a crowd like the toy peddler."

After Situ immigrated to Los Angeles in 1997 as a figurative painter, he connected with the nearby Autry Museum of the American West, where leaders encouraged him to interpret early Chinese immigrant life. Situ found the subjects exciting, and the Western American art community has embraced this lesser-told immigration narrative.

Photographer Arnold Genthe (1869–1942) was based in San Francisco from 1895 to 1911. His fascination with Chinatown resulted in hundreds of images. Courtesy of Library of Congress

(Left) *Chinese Hired by the Central Pacific Railroad*, 1864. Image courtesy of Security Pacific National Bank Collection, Los Angeles Public Library; (Right) Alfred A. Hart (1816–1908) *Filling in the Secret Town Trestle, #48*. California State University, Chico, Meriam Library Special Collections

Chinese laborers spent more than five years clearing land and laying track through the solid granite of the Sierra Nevada. The longest tunnel, Summit Tunnel #6, was 1,700 feet long and took two full years of construction. Building the remaining miles of track—over desert and plains—went much quicker. It is estimated that up to 20,000 Chinese immigrants contributed to the project.

There is little information about individual Chinese laborers. Payroll ledgers often listed only foremen, and very few were Chinese. No letters or journals from Chinese railroad workers have ever been found.

NOTE: The map here was originally drawn in 1883. The branching tracks in dark gray are connecting railroad lines built after the Transcontinental was completed. Map courtesy of Library of Congress. Content and design courtesy of Chinese Historical Society of America, *Voices from the Railroad*, 2019.

TIMELINE & MAP OF U.S. TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD CONSTRUCTION

APRIL 12, 1861
American Civil War begins

JUNE 28, 1861
Central Pacific Railroad company organized

JULY 1, 1862
Pacific Railroad Act signed by Abraham Lincoln

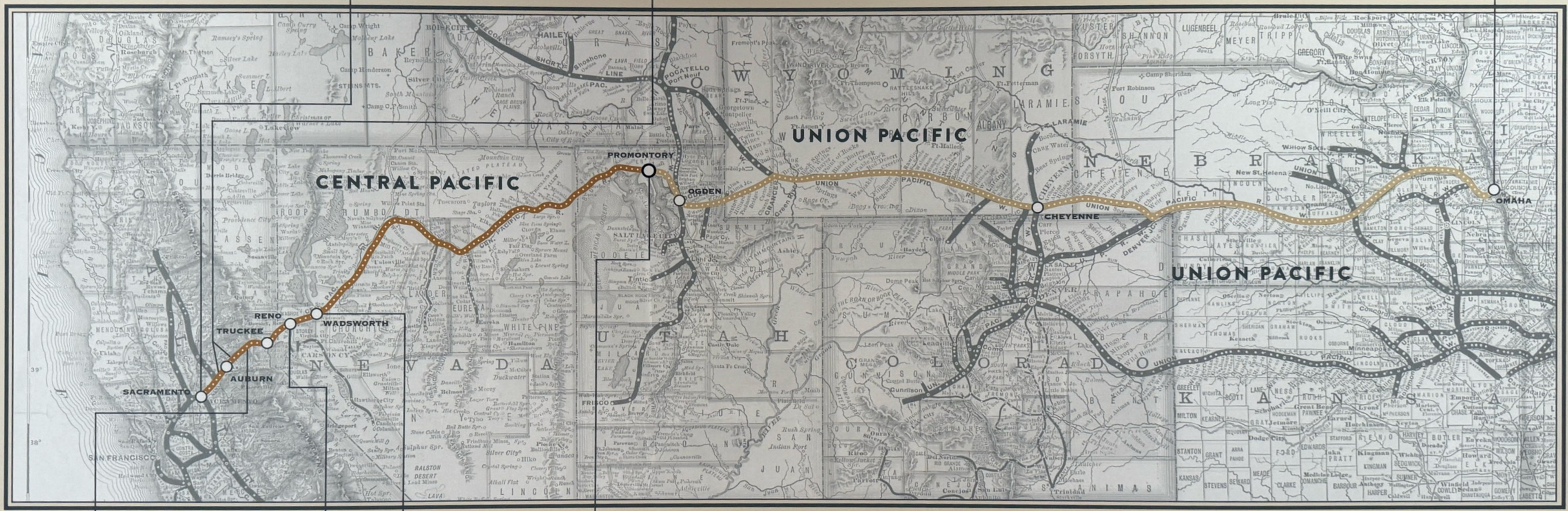
OCTOBER 26, 1863
First rail laid

FEBRUARY 1865
50 Chinese hired to fill dump carts

APRIL 9, 1865
American Civil War ends

APRIL–JUNE 1865
Central Pacific hires Chinese workers

JULY 1865
Union Pacific begins laying track from Omaha



AUGUST 1865
Summit Tunnel #6 begins in the Sierras

WINTER 1866–1867
Chinese build snow sheds to protect tracks

JUNE 26–JULY 1, 1867
Chinese workers strike

AUGUST 30, 1867
Summit Tunnel #6 completed

JUNE 19, 1868
Line reaches Reno, Nevada

JULY 22, 1868
Line reaches Wadsworth, Nevada

APRIL 28, 1869
Central Pacific lays 10 miles of track in 12 hours

MAY 10, 1869
Central Pacific and Union Pacific meet at Promontory, Utah

MAY 15, 1869
First trains to Sacramento, California on Transcontinental line

5½ YEARS TO BUILD **188 MILES** FROM SACRAMENTO TO WADSWORTH

10 MONTHS TO BUILD REMAINING **501 MILES** TO PROMONTORY

ESTIMATED CHINESE RAILROAD WORKFORCE OVER TIME

JANUARY 1864
23

APRIL 1865
1,200

JUNE 1865
2,000

JULY 1865
4,000

FALL 1868
10,000

APRIL 28, 1869*
3,000

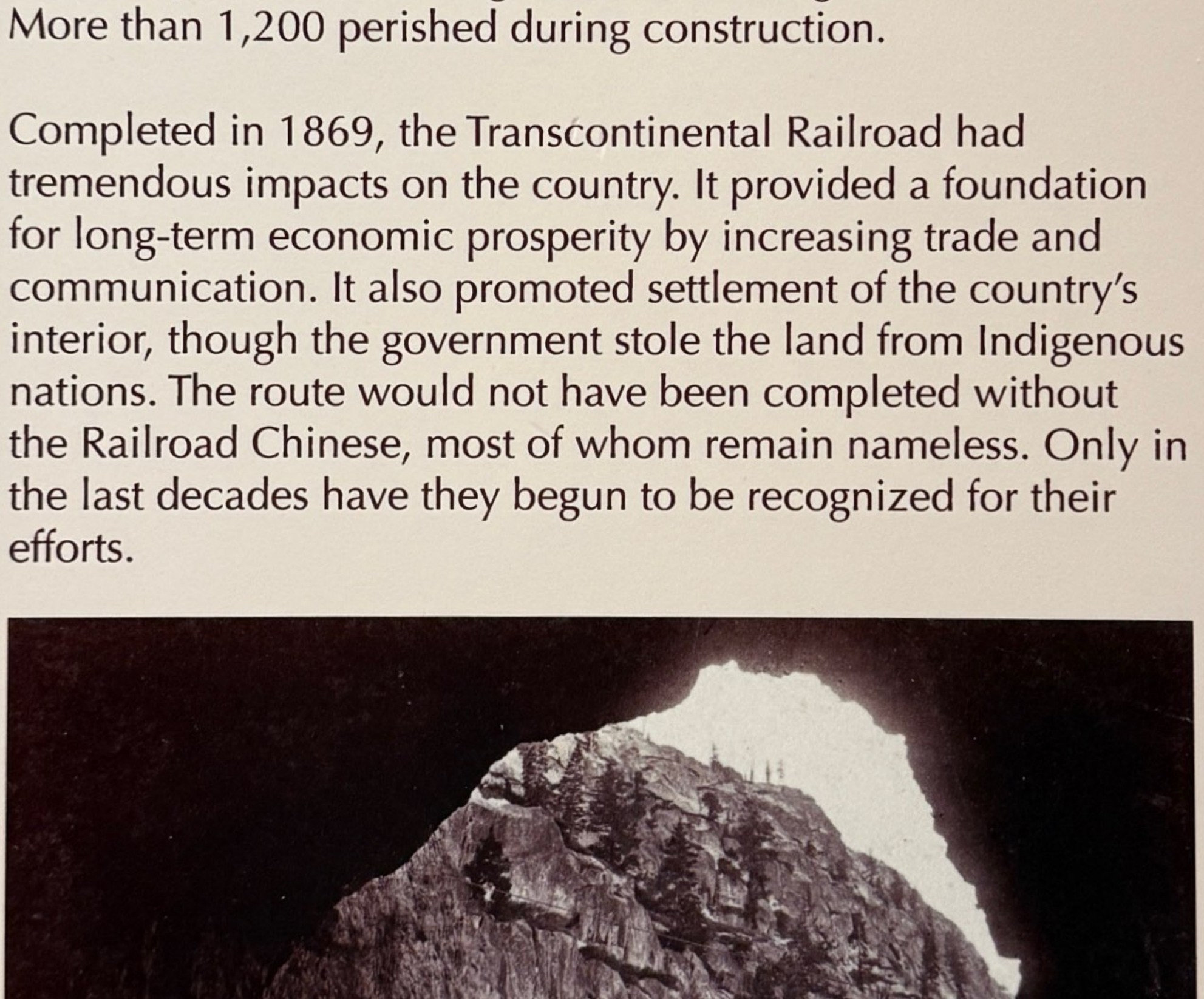
* 10 miles of track laid in 1 day

Building the Railroad

Constructing the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s was a monumental engineering feat that connected the East and West coasts of the United States with a continuous iron road. Chinese immigrants made up 90 percent of the work force for the Central Pacific Railroad, the company responsible for laying track from Sacramento eastward.

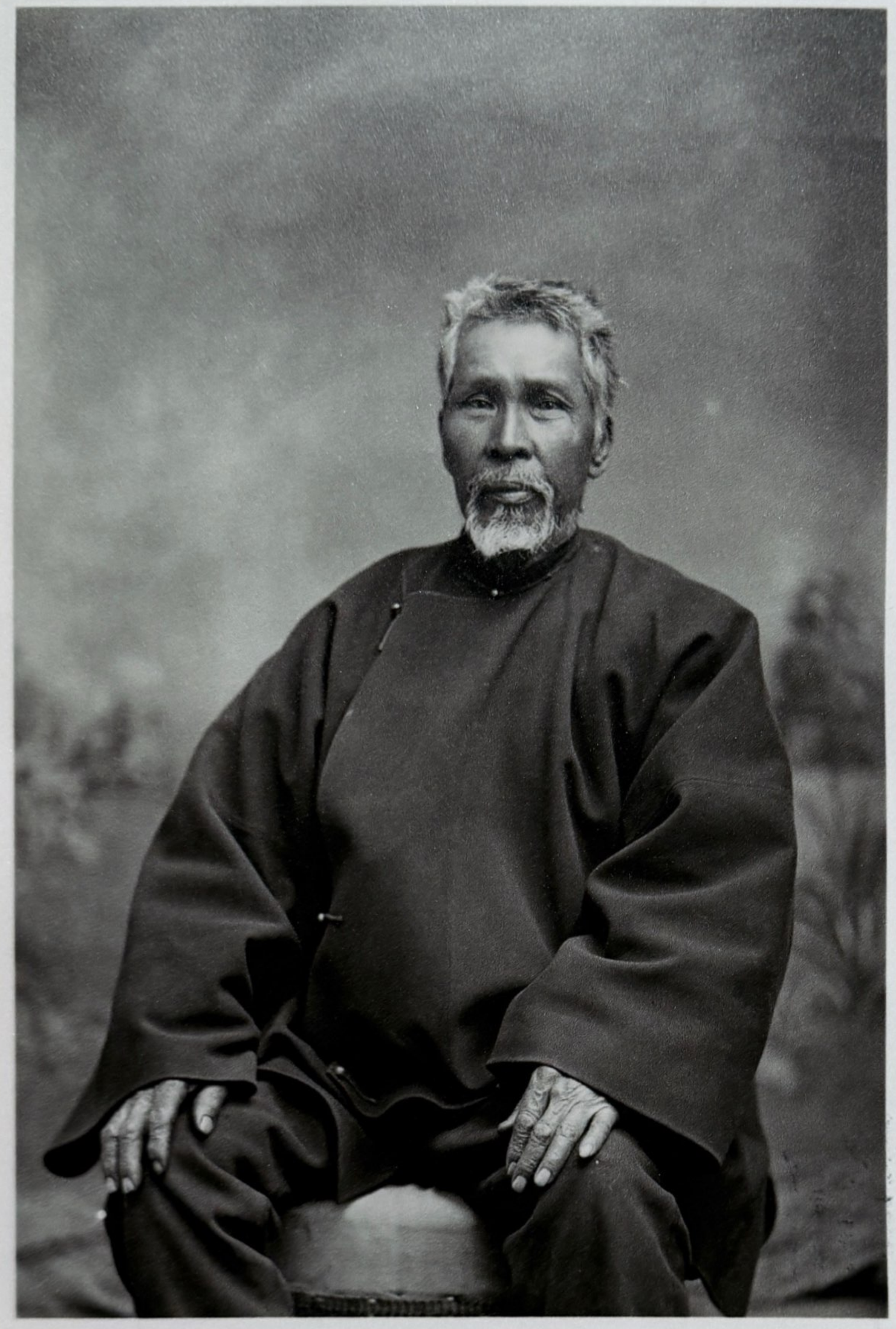
The Central Pacific encountered difficult terrain and dangerous conditions, especially over and through the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains. Young male Chinese immigrants, numbering in the thousands, provided a source of cheap and exploitable labor, but the men quickly proved themselves capable and efficient. From blasting 15 tunnels through solid granite to laying 10 miles of track in one day, the Railroad Chinese persevered through harsh and dangerous conditions. More than 1,200 perished during construction.

Completed in 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad had tremendous impacts on the country. It provided a foundation for long-term economic prosperity by increasing trade and communication. It also promoted settlement of the country's interior, though the government stole the land from Indigenous nations. The route would not have been completed without the Railroad Chinese, most of whom remain nameless. Only in the last decades have they begun to be recognized for their efforts.



Alfred A. Hart (1816–1908), From Tunnel #10, Looking West, c. 1868, Library of Congress

THE GOLD SEEKERS
CHINESE CAMP 1850



This photograph of Gin Lin by notable pioneer photographer Peter Britt is part of the Britt Photograph Collection at Southern Oregon University and made available courtesy of Hannon Library Special Collections.

Despite discrimination, a few Chinese miners found notable success, such as mining labor boss Gin Lin. He immigrated around 1850 and headed north to Oregon. Though laws prohibited Chinese property ownership, he purchased a claim in 1864 on the Little Applegate River. Soon many of the laborers he had previously contracted to other mine owners came to work for him. As his company grew, he introduced hydraulic mining to southern Oregon. Through industry and ingenuity, Gin Lin and his mining company played an important role in southern Oregon's economy.

Mian Situ
Chinese American, born 1953

The Gold Seekers, Chinese Camp, 1850
2015
Oil on canvas

After 1849, Northern California's population surged with seekers of gold from around the world. Included were thousands of Chinese who dreamed of taking riches home to their families. By the early 1850s, however, the amount of surface gold had dwindled, and prospectors increasingly were fighting one another over mining claims and profits. Anti-immigrant tensions soared, and the new California legislature adopted a Foreign Miners License Law, a tax equivalent to $780 today. The bill was later repealed but replaced with another that singled out Chinese miners.

Because their ethnicity and culture were visually different than other immigrant miners—and the Chinese were industrious workers who had found some success—they often were targeted with violence and robberies. Generally, Chinese miners kept to themselves, working diligently in groups. Others labored for white prospectors, as portrayed in this painting. They also worked abandoned claims, after being thrown out of more prosperous areas.

During the Gold Rush, placer mining ("plasser") was the main method of finding precious nuggets, flakes, and dust. Photo by Joseph Starkweather, Head of Auburn Ravine, 1852. Digital Public Library of America

Chinese Immigration to the American West

While European American settlers gradually pushed the United States frontier westward throughout the 1800s, the West Coast was developing independently as well. Accelerated by the mid-century discovery of gold, the population boom included Chinese laborers who crossed the Pacific Ocean to California.

Most 19th century Chinese emigrated from the region of Canton (Guangdong Province today), leaving behind war and famine in hopes of finding wealth on "Gold Mountain." Starting a new life away from familiar culture was challenging, but for many decades anti-Chinese hostility made settling in the U.S. even more difficult. In the 1860s, thousands found low-wage labor building the Transcontinental Railroad and other manual work. Chinatowns also developed in urban areas as ethnic enclaves. Discrimination peaked with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited current residents from citizenship and restricted new immigration. It took decades to overturn the laws—and much longer for Chinese immigrant achievements and contributions to be recognized. However, they were instrumental in helping to build the American West and shape its cultural landscape.

In the paintings here, contemporary Chinese American artists reflect on their own, more recent immigration experiences through historical interpretations. These scenes of positivity and mingling cultures speak to identity, community, and resilience.

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