The Chinese and the Iron Road

BUILDING THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

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CHAPTER 3

The View from Home

Dreams of Chinese Railroad Workers across the Pacific

ZHANG GUOXIONG,
WITH ROLAND HSU

Scholars in the United States have long studied the Chinese workers who made a historic contribution to building the transcontinental railway. Both Chinese and American researchers have extensively referenced documents and popular materials available in US public and private collections. In Guangdong Province, we have pursued an important parallel path, uncovering and interpreting Chinese government documents and original materials of popular culture from the hometowns, or *qiaoxiang*, of the Chinese migrant laborers from the era.

In addition to using new sources, this chapter reveals new insights into the impact of the Chinese railroad workers upon their return to their home villages. Working alongside colleagues in the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University, we take this opportunity to "reverse the gaze" of subject and observer and view the Pacific passage of labor migrants to North America as it looks from the well-traveled coast of southern China.[1]

In this essay we develop an argument in two parts. First, the Pacific passage for those who went to build the Central Pacific Railroad mirrors the travel of those who migrated in search of gold in the United States. Second, the Chinese railway workers who returned home profoundly influenced their hometowns in ways that we can still detect today.

> cannot become mature, and a man's success is achieved by no other way but [by] being hardworking and thrifty. What he says, though not sophisticated, are words [that] contain the truth.[23]

These words are on a porcelain tablet made by an individual named Li Yijun. The words narrate the fortunes of his grandparents, Li Junqian and Lady Zhang. The tablet is a rare relic of a Chinese laborer preserved in *qiaoxiang*.

Qiaoxiang *Transformed: Material Prosperity*

In the memoirs of some Qing officials, we find testimony that would seem to support the stories in the ballads and poems. In the memoir of Zhang Zhidong, the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, and Zhang Yinhuan, an emissary to the United States (1886), we learn that, "according to many foreigners we have consulted, the annual service revenue earned by Chinese laborers, with their daily cost deducted, is remitted home to provide for their families; the total sum amounts to several million liang of silver."[24] In the memoir of Xue Fucheng (1890), who was in charge of establishing Chinese consulates in Southeast Asia, a similar record was found: "[A]ccording to the inspection in America of the San Francisco Bank's general ledger of exchange bills, the annual remittance to China from the overseas Chinese amounts to the sum of about eight million liang of silver."[25]

Chinese overseas laborers, through their remittances to their families, influenced the patterns of consumption and the standards of living in their hometowns. The following source documents a marked shift:

> In Kaiping County, before the reign of Emperor Guangxu [1871–1908], the objects of daily life and provisions that were prominent in Wuyi were mostly produced locally, but subsequent to remittances from America the market grew for imported goods.
>
> Since the foreign influence came, there have been five customs out of the six that have been changed. For example, in dressing and meals, people like to dress and eat in [W]estern style; in courtesy, they prefer free love to traditional marriage and bowing to kowtow; calendars do not contain the leap year and month; home lots are flat and houses are built with tall towers; is flat without surrounding walls and the house built high with towers around; the devices for plotting the land are no longer the plow with yoke, and the process of grinding hulled rice is improved; only the dialect is not greatly changed, but its change

> will happen soon; such [words] as English *no* instead of Chinese *fou* and English *yes* instead of Chinese *shi* come from the lips of the returned overseas.[26]

Even today, among families whose ancestors were *jinshan* uncles, their households retain objects that were brought back from overseas work on railroads. At Long'anli, Shuilouxiang, Dajiang Town, Taishan County, in the houses of Li Jiancong and Lijiangui, great-grandsons of Li Youqin, who worked as a labor-recruiting agent for the Union Pacific Railroad, one finds objects such as the "*jinahan* box"—perhaps referring to a travel trunk—and a kerosene packing case, along with four British Tower brand pots and basins that remain in use. Even after 150 years, the families still express pride of ownership of the well-made items.

Beginning in the 1860s, Chinese laborers who returned from North America brought altered designs for family home architecture. Researchers have been able to trace a number of examples of new multifamily clan homes that were built at the time alongside the older design. In some instances, there is evidence that multiple returning workers combined resources to buy land and extend the architectural footprint. The layout and model of the new houses blend traditional forms with Western influences, such as consistent layout of rooms and built-in ventilation, including windows. These family homes also use modern construction materials, such as concrete, and the tradition of the three-room, two-corridor low house, or *lu*, began to give way to a new style of building with two or more stories.

In the rural areas of Taishan and Kaiping, on the lintels of the Western-style buildings, architects infused wall paintings and ornamental designs with motifs from railroad lines, equipment, and Western scenery.

New Wealth and New Culture

Along with material wealth, home communities absorbed social and cultural markers of the migrants' lives abroad. We have noted evidence of changes in the *qiaoxiang* dialect, such as the introduction of the words *yes* and *no*; other changes are the habit of saying "hello" as a greeting and "bye-bye" when departing, along with the use of random words such as *chocolate, taffy, cracker, ball, stamp, cap, mark, face, sorry,* and other terms that in popular parlance have tended to replace the corresponding Chinese words. In *qiaoxiang* vernacular speech, speakers combine English and Chinese to form hybrid expressions. For example,

becoming naked is expressed as *tuozhe blank*, which combines the Taishan dialect word *tuozhe* (to undress) and the English word *blank*. Another example is the hybrid word for the color scarlet, *hong blood*, which combines the Taishan dialect word *hong* (red) and the English word *blood* to characterize that type of red.

In terms of social roles, the absence of men while working overseas led some *jinshan* wives to become the primary wage earners in their families:

> Since the mid-reign of Emperor Guangxu, most of the men have gone overseas, and the women have been engaged in the tillage. . . . Women are wet with mud all over the body, doing hard labor in fields. In the [n]orthern provinces such scenes cannot be seen. When a person comes from the north he will feel strange [seeing] the women with naked feet and even naked to the part above the knees. Now such scenes can be seen only in the fields.[27]

Qiaoxiang women in this way began to play a role in the social transformation of the home villages that marked the influence of the laboring men in absentia.

Dreams Not Realized

Of course, not all the Gold Mountain dreams became reality. In *qiaoxiang* documents there are many records that testify to disappointment. Popular songs narrate the depression and pessimism of unsuccessful Chinese laborers who incurred the cost of travel abroad but returned with little or nothing to show for their efforts.

> The crescent moon is shining over China,
> Some people feel happy while others are distressed.
> Some return home after making a fortune,
> Others end up drifting abroad.
> Sojourners in a strange land,
> Still burdened with debt.
> I am not able to soothe my sorrow,
> Especially when I am thinking of my aging parents.
> I would wish to return,
> Yet without money to afford the journey;
> Having strived hard to migrate overseas for a better life,
> I still meet with hardship and discord.
> Born under an unlucky star,
> Achieving nothing in the comings and goings of life;

Even after going abroad,
I have gained nothing while journeying east and west;
Yin and Yang are misaligned,
Being away from home leads to solitude and destitution,
Moving around the world,
I cannot live in peace and walk with happiness.[28]

In 1992 a graveyard with 387 graves of destitute overseas Chinese was found in Huangkeng, Xinhui County.[29] Those interred there died abroad without leaving funds or biographical records. Philanthropic efforts during the 1880s and 1890s transported these remains to China, and the graveyard bears sad witness to their sacrifices. According to the custom in Wuyi *qiaoxiang*, the procedure for repatriating remains included unearthing, cleaning, and arranging the bones; gathering all the remains for shipment at the port of San Francisco; and sending the remains to China in batches. Of the 387 distinct bodily remains at the Xinhui graveyard, there are a number of individuals who may be identified with reasonable certainty to be former gold miners and railroad construction laborers in North America. This graveyard has thus far been preserved and is an important site for further research.

Songs of mourning from the era include refrains that echo the graveyard of the destitute:

A Letter to My Son

Furious at the mention of Gold Mountain,
My heart beaks at the thought of you my beloved son.
You promised with certainty when you departed,
You would be back in two or three years.
Exhorted by your mother,
Entreating you repeatedly.
We secretly wiped away tears when you departed,
It was because of poverty that you had to leave home.
Once you left your native land, how could you
Completely forget your hometown?
People say that a son in America will
Make his family rich and noble,
How could we have expected once you left home
That the money you sent back could not even pay for a cigarette.

Although poverty is determined by Heaven,
Gambling and whoring is your own failing.

As time passes, you have not found the gold that you sought,
You'd better turn around and come back home soon.
Since the outlook in the alien land is good,
Over ten years have passed already.

When will you pay back your parents' toil and care?
In order to avoid being ungrateful and in disrepute.
When will you see your brothers again?
To avoid more separation from your siblings
Who will be able to take care of your wife on your behalf?
To avoid leaving your wife in an empty house, sad and lonely.

"Charting your career path before the age of thirty," as the old saying goes,
You are almost thirty now.
Having no children of your own,
Your wife is drowning in tears all day long.
Your mother is becoming old and weak,
Me, your father, I am growing gaunt and weak
No longer able to step out of the house
Tired and without appetite for food or drink,
Often spending the day lying on a mat or sleeping in bed.

Today's world is full of disappointment,
Neither reason nor sympathy prevails.
People gossip about the absence of a son,
Saying that I do not have a son to attend to me when I may be dying leaves me feeling alone and helpless.
Hearing what people are saying makes me choke with tears,
Crying silently all the time.
If you want to see your parents, turn around now
Come back home without delay.
If you return home too late,
We may only meet in the afterworld.
However rich you may be at that time,
You will be facing our tombs alone and with only your sobs.
This letter is too short for me to express my feelings,
It's all up to your heart whether you will listen to me.[30]

This letter/ballad, to be sung in the manner of rhythmic *wuyi muyudiao*, relates the fate of many of the Chinese laborers who went overseas and never returned:

The Good Wife Anticipates the Return of Her Husband

In the evening, with watery eyes, I recall the time my husband left.
I said to you that we were married for only a half year.
At leisure I look to the distance with worry; from low to high I have vacant eyes.
Soon at New Year's I went out in the neighborhood,
wondering when my husband would return.
At the lunar January lantern show it is crowded;
men and women are watching the show eagerly.
But I just stay in my boudoir alone, alone in the room.
People are joyful at the lantern festival,
But I'm gloomy with untold complaints.
Thinking long and hard I cannot be relieved,
with tears and a desolate mood.
One day if I become shameless,
I will shyly peek at a handsome man.[31]

The sentiments of wives and women who mourned the loss of those who never returned from North America are heard in multiple popular ballads, such as this representative sample:

This man of talent is right for me,
And the feeling between us is mutual.
Suddenly you are departing for America,
Leaving me your young girl of around ten years old.
How could you bear parting with me?
Standing tall and going forward to a foreign land.
Sailing across the Pacific Ocean,
Leaving me alone, cold, and inconsolable on my pillow.
I am young and afraid to sleep alone,
Why should you go and stay abroad?
Yet you still travelled to America,
I regret that we are separated by thousands of miles.
Let me ask you,
How long can one's youthful beauty last?
Even if you become rich and famous in America,
You will still make this beautiful woman frown with sadness.
Time flies,
And we can never retrieve it.

I lose my youthful looks with each passing day,
And I seek to seize the moment and live life to the fullest!
Sigh,
My husband is in Gold Mountain,
No matter how much money is brought back home,
You cannot buy back our youth.[32]

Absence stirred grief that led to special rituals of healing. Communities of the Wuyi *qiaoxiang* possess a heritage of reconstructing family lineages for those whose male line was interrupted by a migrant to North America who never returned. In the *qiaoxiang* tradition, these families were known to purchase a son so as to formalize the continuity of the male lineage of the absent migrant. In some cases the deceased migrant's parents found for their absent son a wife: the new bride was to hold a rooster in place of the husband during the wedding ceremony. With her marriage symbolically consummated, the daughter-in-law was thereby able to move into the now multigenerational family home. These special *jinshan* wives knew their symbolic husbands only from the evidence of a photo or from testimony from one of their former acquaintances that the husbands had indeed been *jinshan* uncles. Such special *jinshan* wives are known in some circles as "virgin widows."

Researchers from the Guangdong Qiaoxiang Culture Research Center met with such a family in Long'anli, Shuilouxiang, Dajiang Town, Taishan County. We express our appreciation to Li Zhuohao, who served as cultural informant and who himself is a descendant of the family. His grandfather was a Chinese railroad laborer who worked in the United States and subsequently moved to Canada. According to the family history, the grandfather continued to send remittances but never returned home and eventually died in Canada. The grandmother of Li Zhuohao was known as a virgin widow, and she was married into the family in a ceremony in which she held a rooster to stand in for the absent groom. She subsequently obtained a son from Enping County, and this boy grew to become the father of Li Zhuohao.

Based on the reference materials in the *qiaoxiang*, we have endeavored to reverse the perspective and to render the aspirations and realities of the gold miners and railroad laborers who made the passage to North America, as well as some who were able to return to their home villages. Evidence of Chinese laborers in North America may be found in official documents, but in the

qiaoxiang the government records offer little in the way of personal stories. Popular and private sources are, as we demonstrate, indispensable for research on the Chinese laborers from the perspective of *qiaoxiang*. Indeed, we plan to continue to seek and interpret such relics, oral testimonies, and materials of popular culture.

Appendix

POEM 1

Verse 1

敬告诸梓里,
莫短英雄气,
发财终需遇时期,
独係眼前条命否。
运一至,
转贫为富易,
十万腰缠回家里,
天伦叙乐笑微微

Verse 2

自小真劳碌,
三餐共碗粥,
每受饥寒难尽录,
今幸时来唔驰卜。
发达速,
买田兼起屋,
感谢皇天撑开目,
赐我寿长享晚福。

Verse 3

目下难糊口,
造化睇未透,
唔信这样到白头,
祇因眼前命不偶。
运气凑,
世界还在后,
转过几年富且厚,
恁时置业起洋楼。

POEM 2

当年穷过鬼,
霎时富且贵,
唔难屋润又家肥,
回忆囊空因命水。
运气凑,
黄白从心遂,
柸极泰来财积累,
腰缠十万锦衣归。
挥首太阳望,
还家向甲方,
霎时富足就回唐,
顺经横滨到香港。
趁春光,
约友齐同往,
十万腰缠归乡党,
天伦叙乐慰高堂。

POEM 3

金山客,
冇一千有八百;
南洋伯,

银袋包,
大伯大伯;
香港仔,
香港赚钱香港使。
十一月冬,
十二月年,
阿爸金山多寄钱,
新年人人做新衣,
买个肥鹅过肥年,

POEM 4

有女毋嫁读书君,
自己闩门自己睏;
有女毋嫁做饼郎,
三年不睏倒半年床;

有女毋嫁耕田人,
时时泥气鬱败人;

有女要嫁金山客,
打转船头百算百。

POEM 5

月亮弯弯过九洲,
有人快乐有人忧,
有人发财还乡井,
有人离家外漂流。
逗留羁旅邸,
依旧满身债,
毫无振作暗伤怀,
每念高堂年纪迈。
欲归计,
囊中冇文解,

发愤图强来他徙,
仍然屯蹇事无谐。
一生条命薄,
来去都冇作,
纵使离乡转外国,
东走西奔无所获。
阴阳错,
出更门落索,
转过天涯四个角,
居弗安兮行不乐。

POEM 6 《寄子书》 A *letter to my son*

提起金山怒冲天,
忆着你们更凄惨。
来往该时讲口响,
三年两载转回乡。
你母叮呤言至嘱,
言来至嘱万千千。
临行暗拭离情泪,
缘贫无奈别家庭。
岂知一往离乡井,
忘却故园这一边。
人话有儿到美境,
穷根可断振家声。
讵知自别庭帷后,
付来未够买烟钱。
虽则贫穷天注定,
好嫖好赌怎能胜
日久黄金唔遂愿,
早宜拨马转回程。

既係他乡风景好
算来不觉十余年。
问你劬劳何时报,
忘恩背义非人形。
问你雁行何日叙
分离手足独茕茕。
问你妻房谁代养,
空帷岑寂自悲伤。
古语云创业前三十
,你今三十尚余零,
膝下未添男和女,
妻房终日泪涟涟。
你母近今年衰老,
风前之烛春水冰。
我今身瘦和血弱,
不曾移步出庭前。
茶饭不思精神疲,
时躭身蓆在床眠。

况今世界三欺两,
道理唔通不念情。
人话有儿当作冇,
送终无子寡伶仃。
侧耳听闻喉哽咽,
暗垂珠泪落无停。
如欲见亲须速转,
即刻回家莫流连。
倘若迟来难见面,
相逢只恐在幽冥。
异日纵然千百万,
空对灵前哭几声。
纸短情长难尽述,
听乎否也问心田。

POEM 7

才郎合妹意,
正是两情痴,
忽然又话往花旗,
奴况青春年十几。
忍割舍,
挺生飘异地,
帆驾太平洋万里,
丢侬孤枕冷凄其。
青春怕独寝,
君何出外羁,
虽然游历到花旗,
恨隔程途千万里。
试问汝,
韶华曾有几?
纵使富贵留欧美,
空教红粉锁双眉。

光阴如急板,
得去不得返,,
催奴日日减朱颜,
行乐及时唔可慢。
一声叹,
夫婿在金山,
纵使腰缠归十万,
也唔能买青春还。