

Doc Chat Episode Thirteen Transcript

Chinese Railroad Workers in Stereoscopic Photography

JULIE GOLIA: Hi, everybody. Sorry we're starting a little bit late. We're just going to wait for a few more people to hop into the attendee's room. Great to see new names and familiar names on here. Welcome to Doc Chat. My name is Julie Golia, the curator at New York Public Library. I'm so excited to welcome you to our spring season of Doc Chat and we're starting off with a bang, with an amazing episode. We like to keep things exciting around here, so we are missing our speaker right now. Who will be speaking with Zulay and so we're trying to track him down even as we want to start this episode because we don't have a lot of time together on these brief Doc Chats. So I'm going to introduce the episode and then Zulay and I will start talking while we're waiting for Richard. He's having internet problems and we're really hoping he's going to be able to get on here because he's fantastic and a wonderful part of our NYPL family. So we're going to give him a couple of minutes and hopefully he's able to get on. So for those of you who are new to this, welcome. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the New York Public Library that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Zulay Chang, specialist in the photography collection, will hopefully be joined by Richard, who is a Ph.D. candidate and a Wertheim study fellow. We'll analyze a series of 19th century photographs related to the construction and completion of the transcontinental railroad including a stereograph depicting Chinese railroad workers. Our guests are going to speak for about ten, 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, as you have begun to do, please feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. Once we go into question and answer, please make sure you change that to the question and answer segment. When you're using the chat function, make sure you're sending to all the attendees and not just the panelists. We want to know more about you so like we do every episode, I'm going to launch a poll right now with a couple of quick questions that I would love for you to answer. So at this point, I'm going to throw it over to Zulay. Tell us about what we are talking about today. You're muted.

ZULAY CHANG: I see Richard so maybe we can hear him very shortly.

JULIE GOLIA: Oh, good. Excellent.

ZULAY CHANG: Let me just get my, great. Hi, everyone. Welcome to, hold on a second. It's just a day of technical issues. I think people are still working on -- okay, here we go.

JULIE GOLIA: You can all take your time on the poll and I'm going to pop some links into some

images into our chat.

ZULAY CHANG: Yes, okay. Well, thank you, Julie, for the introduction. Welcome, everyone, again. I'll get right into our discussion. Oh, I should close the poll here.

JULIE GOLIA: Don't worry about that. I can do it.

ZULAY CHANG: So in this episode, we will be discussing three images related to Chinese laborers. During the construction of the transcontinental railroad. My background and specialization is in the history of photography, which includes photographic processes. We hope this chat will provide a way to look at primary sources from an interdisciplinary perspective. So what you're seeing here is a stereograph. Two of the same image side by side. Mounted on a card. Stereographs were meant to be viewed in a stereograph viewer. As shown here. And it's meant to produce a three-dimensional effect. Stereographs were invented in the 1850s and rose to popularity in the 19th century from 1870 to 1920s. They were sold directly to the middle class via catalogs and salesmen. They were a form of entertainment. And the information we have of this particular stereograph is the title, the distributor or publisher, the date, which is probably not the date of when the photograph was taken, but when it was published. The publisher was founded in 1847. Then known as Edward Anthony and Co. In 1859, it added stereographs to their product line and sold them via mail order catalogs. An interesting tidbit is H.T. Anthony later became -- but dissolved in 1939 after merging with another company. When we use photographs for research, especially images from the 19th century -- the format of the photograph, in this case, a stereograph, can help us not only understand what's in picture, but also the context of its objects. For instance, we should ask how were these images circulated? Who were they created for? And what was the original intention behind these objects? We can return to these questions during the Q&A, but right now, I would like to turn it over to Richard, if he's here, hopefully, to discuss the image and subject of the stereograph. So, Richard, what can we glean from this image and its title information?

RICHARD CHEU: Thanks, Zulay? Can you hear me?

ZULAY CHANG: Yes.

RICHARD CHEU: I had to change computers and rooms. For the benefit of the teachers, I want to address two topics first. First, the role of the historian and two, the historical content of the photographs we're looking at. The role of the historian is to interpret historical events they did not witness. There are three steps. The historian collects information, sorts the information into categories, which is very important. Fact, fiction, opinions, mythology. The third step of the historian is to formulate an interpretation based on those facts and that distinguishes an historian from others who simply give opinions. Now, the H historical context of the photograph, all three. In the 19th century, there was intense anti-Chinese sentiment in California because of the arrival of two groups of journeyers from China. The first group were gold miners who came in response to gold in 1848 and they came in over a number of years. The second group were

the adults who built the railroads, like the people we see here. Now, the result of that, these people coming in, these sojourners was this attitude was that they're stealing our gold and our wages. Now, these, the end result was that there developed a national anti-Chinese sentiment, which over the '70s and into the '80s resulted into the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act which lasted 86 years. The result of all that period of exclusion, which included Asians, was that Chinese American history has been hidden and is not included in America's historic memory. That is what people know about it. Now, the photograph we're looking at is really kind of interesting because I'm sure it had great commercial value. On the front, you see two men seated. The left is the white foreman, the left is the gang leader who could probably translate orders for those standing behind him. That's kind of a nominal picture. The real historical value of this picture is when you turn it and look at the back and it says John Chinaman on the railroad. John and Chinaman are two xenophobic labels placed on Chinese men in the 19th and 20th century. Let's take the word, Chinaman. It's a racist code word for heathen. A heathen was someone they did not want in the United States so that title, you calling him a Chinaman said he's a heathen, we don't want him here. Either as a migrant or resident. John puts the Chinese men into a category of subservience and removes their humanistic qualities. It's the same as white southerners calling a Black African-American man a boy or a woman a girl. So that's the context of that particular photograph.

ZULAY CHANG: Thank you, Richard. So lucky for us, we have the stereograph photograph or digitize of the verso as well, so we're able to source the title of this photograph. It comes directly from the publisher. As Richard pointed out, you know, what we can learn from the label is the title, publisher's name, the series title, views along the Union Pacific railroad and the image number, which was used in the original sales catalog. This is the only stereograph depicting Chinese laborers published by Anthony. So on to the second image here. This image is a scan of the original taken by Anthony J. Russell, the official photographer hired by the railroad. What's interesting about this image from a photographic history perspective is that it's a stereo view. Why did Russell make images in this format? Because they could be distributed to a mass audience. The motivation behind hiring a photographer was to receive support from the public and make it easier for the railroad companies to gain approvals. This image is often reproduced digitally online as a single image, but finding the original adds to our understanding as to how the image was disseminated. I've included the title information. So, what is the significance of this image, Richard, and how does it contrast with the previous stereograph?

RICHARD CHEU: The importance of this is that it's called laying the last rail. The ceremony for the completion of the railroad is called a golden spike ceremony. It had two parts. The first part is laying the last rail. We have to move back a few weeks before this. This occurs, the picture is May 10th, 1869. We have to go back to April 28th. At that time, both railroads were racing toward each other. Of course building as fast as they can because they're getting paid by the mile and the union Pacific had reached the promised place of meeting and the central Pacific made a record of laying ten miles of rail in one day on April 28th. They came within three miles of a summit. The three miles. Okay, they finished the railroad with a gap of one rail on April 29th or 30th. Ten days before the ceremony. What happened was at that point, having

completed its railroad, the central Pacific sent its workforce of Chinese laborers westward because the railroad had been built so hastily so all they left was one gang of Chinese workers who were going to lay the rail. So at the time of the ceremony, which was May 10th, 1869, the golden spike ceremony, the first part, there's only one crew of Chinese here and they are laying the rail. Do you have any close up of that, Zulay?

ZULAY CHANG: Yes, I do.

RICHARD CHEU: Thank you so much. This is great because you see in the red outline on the right of the man with the white hat is a Chinese laborer, one of the gang. Back here on the left corner is another laborer. You can tell they're watching the foremen and their clothes and their hats show you the final crew of six to eight Chinese. This man is looking at it and there's a stick over here on the left here of the photograph. That's the rail gauge to make sure that the tracks are properly together. They're not too wide or too narrow. The important point of laying the last rail is the first part of the national celebration was after the laying the last rail, when the Chinese brought their rail in and put it in at the train, the railroad was complete. The construction superintendent, from the Central Pacific Railroad, invited the Chinese gang to come to a reception for executives where he introduced this group of Chinese workers who represented an entire workforce, which was an estimated 15,000. This group of people were representing all the Chinese workers and they were invited to sit down, which was really unique. It shows that there was a honoring of the Chinese workers at the national celebration.

ZULAY CHANG: So on to the last image. This is another quite well-known image by Russell. This image is not a stereograph and we can see that it was taken with quite a large camera with a glass plate negative measures ten by 13 inches. This is before flexible film and enlargers were invented, so the print was the same size as the negative. How did Russell intend for this image to be circulated and seen? And Richard, again, what is the significance behind this image and why does it matter?

RICHARD CHEU: I think there are two points of significance. One is the most apparent. We're looking at a photograph and it shows the two engines. The cpr on the left, a wood burner. And on the right, you see the Union Pacific. This is where the engines meet and you have a collection of people and they're celebrating it. This was taken several hours after the end of the ceremonies. The executives for both railroads had already left the scene and this was staged by Russell and I believe the other fellow from the Central Pacific also took a picture. It's known as the champagne photograph. Time magazine considers it one of the 100 iconic photographs of America. You can see someone's holding a bottle of champagne and someone's got glasses. That's the apparent obvious that these people are gathered to set this event, but it is scheduled after the end of the golden spike ceremony. There's a mythology that developed probably at the 100th anniversary 50 years ago. Probably originated in the Chinese American community. People were claiming that this was a racist photograph because there are no Chinese visible in it. Someone says that there's a, if you will look closely, someone's got a hat trying to hide someone's face. We don't know whether that's Chinese or not. But the point is as we knew

from laying the last rail, there was only one crew of Chinese at the ceremony and they had gone up to the executive, to be with executives to be honored for all the Chinese workers and that's what six or eight people. So the fact that there are no Chinese here, maybe there are one or two who came over from the dinner, but the point is it's not a racist photograph. That's a mythology that needs to be removed. This is a collection of people who were still around at the site two or three hours after the ceremony was finished. Include some workers and we can go into that later, but they had held up the executives from coming in from the Union Pacific. So there are a lot of people here, but the fact that there are no Chinese visible doesn't make it a racist photograph.

ZULAY CHANG: We have shown a detail of this image. Again, we circled what we, I think is known as one of the Chinese laborers. Is that correct?

RICHARD CHEU: There are people who say it may or may not. That's not the point. The point is it's not a racist photograph. There are only six or eight Chinese present after the ceremony and if one wandered over after a nice dinner, that's fine, but we shouldn't try to create things that didn't exist. The essence of being working from facts, not opinions.

ZULAY CHANG: Right. So, we hope by showing you these three images starting with the stereograph of the Chinese labors, it often takes a bit of research to learn the context of the image, object and creator and using photographs can be tricky, but it's also medium that crosses into many disciplines, like public history that we have here as a prime example. It can result in a very fruitful analysis. So with that, I'll turn it over to Julie.

JULIE GOLIA: Thank you, guys, so much. Sort of fascinating to hear about the backstory behind each of those images. I will say if anybody is not looking at the chat, we've got just a popping chat today with lots of stereograph experts. Thanks to them, I was doing a lot of eye crossing and looking at the photos while Richard and Zulay were talking. So, guys, we have some questions in the chat. I wanted to start with one myself. Which is, you know, I just, I'm interested in the fact that each of these are showing sort of the depictions of labor, but the labor doesn't look kind of back breaking. It looks a little bit staged. So I'm wondering what can we glean from sort of the actual labor experiences of Chinese railroad workers at the time from this or do we have to see these sort of through the lens of the creator of this, who was creating some kind of like promotional material?

RICHARD CHEU: Could I talk about that? The labor was very intense and extremely dangerous. There's another story that the Irish were trying to sabotage the Chinese as they were hanging in baskets over to put in holes for the dynamite. Whether that's true or not, no one can prove. But the reality is that there were very dangerous techniques that were used in building the railroad were used again in building the railroad in Alaska in 1895. A lot of the techniques were the same. This is very, very dangerous work and we can't accrue it to be something that was done specific to the Chinese workers or the Irish workers. It's just the state of the art of how you build a railroad, but hand and human muscle.

ZULAY CHANG: I think from a photography, historical point of view, these photographers were hired essentially to provide sort of this positive image of you know, railroad construction. And so, and also the technology with you know, photographing movement is harder in the 19th century because often, you have to stay still for the image, even though these were you know, made with collodion negatives, that were quicker for stabilizing the shot, but again, you know, I don't, I think these were for more or less promotional purposes.

JULIE GOLIA: I think that's such a good point about the materiality of the way that photos were made at the time. Is that it would be almost impossible to depict back breaking labor because you had to stay still for a certain amount of time when you were taking these, right?

ZULAY CHANG: And the camera is not like today's film, where you just snap, snap, snap. It's like a one plate, one shot, then okay, on to the next one.

JULIE GOLIA: That seems to me like a great point to raise and sort of open a set of questions with students, right? Today, we assume photography is just so easy and that was not the case in the 19th century. It really does change the way you think about it. So to get to some of the great questions people are asking, an anonymous attendee points out that obviously when we hear the word Chinaman today is deeply offensive and wonders if it had that same kind of racist connotation in the 19th century. They say, wasn't it common to say Englishman, Dutchman.

RICHARD CHEU: We had to look at it coming from the United States, Britain, basically. Before that, the development of the hierarchy of races, which occurred in the 17th century, I believe. In which Christians were placed, white Christians at the top, then other people of color were below that. That was a prevailing thought around the 17th century. When they came over to form the United States, the colonies had in its charter that the people who would be controlling the charter would be white Anglo-Saxon protestants and they got in a fight with the Spanish Catholics, but that's come down to the 18th century, we know that the no nothing party existed, which was anti immigrant. And this whole question of calling someone a heathen in the 19th century definitely placed you as someone underneath the superior white Christian person. So that was a code word to say, this is why we don't want them in the United States. There's a lot of history behind that, but the word, heathen, was really how we relate the word Chinaman. Was never used in a positive term in the 19th century, which we're talking about.

JULIE GOLIA: That religious connotation is a really fascinating and not obvious point so I'm so glad you brought that up, Richard. I want to pose a question here posted by Amy, who is sort of poking at this notion of whether the photo is racist or not. But the question is how with up to 15,000 Chinese workers, there were so few depicted. The photograph may not be quote unquote racist, but it depicts a society in a situation that clearly was. Which I think is a very salient point. Richard, do you have thoughts on that?

RICHARD CHEU: Yeah, well, the thing is, I've gone through all the photographs by both the

photographer of the Central Pacific railroad and Union Pacific. Photographs of Chinese, Union Pacific found one, there are basically no photographs of either the Chinese workers or the Irish. There are photographs that would say here we are in Utah, we're here in something and look at that situation, but here are the engines being loaded with something, but no specific photographs, I could find. Maybe my research isn't complete. But I didn't find photographs of Irish workers or Chinese workers by themselves. There was always some kind of activity they may have been involved in. So you had huge Armies on both sides, but these were considered laborers. On the Chinese side, to answer the question about were they employees, the Chinese workers were not employees of the railroad. The railroads used third party contractors who lived in China and advertised and got people to sign on. These were free men because you could not leave the port of Hong Kong unless you were a free man. They were not coolies. Those were slave replacements. These were free men, but they worked for a contractor. The railroad paid the contractor. The contractor paid the workers less the cost of food and other things they provided. So that's why you don't see any records of Chinese workers in the railroad data.

JULIE GOLIA: Actually, Richard, that comment leads into another really good question, which is that somebody asks, do we have records of the names of people who worked on here so we could do further research on them? Sounds like the answer is probably no?

RICHARD CHEU: That's correct. If you were going to find it, you would have to go back to the China into the pearl river delta. I contacted Hong Kong. They have no archives either. These were literal young men and the family would choose the strongest young man to go over and his role, his mission, was to raise enough money, bring back enough money, send enough money home, to raise the economic level of the extended family because the extended family had pooled their resources to get this young man over. He had to be strong, he's going to have to survive. That was his role. His mission. And he was not literate.

JULIE GOLIA: We are at about time and we have a few questions. I'm noticing a number of them are about literature and readings. I want to promise you that even though we can't get to them today, I'm going to pose them to our speakers and in our follow up blog post, we'll see what we can do about providing some of the literature you're asking about. This is just like the best kind of Doc Chats are the ones where we don't want to stop. And we're left wanting more. But happily, we're back to having weekly Doc Chats and we'll be able to pick up some new conversations next week. So, Zulay, before we wrap up, tell people again what's the best way to access photos like these at NYPL?

ZULAY CHANG: So, this material is digitized. All of our American stereoviews are on digital collections and there's about 42,000 that have been digitized and you can search them by filtering them by geographic location and then by subject, then you can also search within digital collections and if anyone needs help, feel free to contact us. Then of course, if there's any specific questions for Richard about you know, Chinese labor, railroad history, you know, you can contact Richard for that. Or you can always e-mail us and we can direct that question to

Richard as well.

JULIE GOLIA: Thank you so much. Well, and links to all the collections that we looked at today along with other resources and the video and transcript of this episode will be published in about a week or so on a post on NYPL's blog, which we will send out to all registrants of this episode. And you can find our previous episodes there as well. The easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the Research@NYPL channel of the NYPL blog. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. On our next episode, I'll be joined by Amaka Okechukwu, a professor of sociology at George Mason University and we'll be analyzing excerpts of Black periodicals and discussing their historical context. She is awesome and you all should be there. It's going to be wonderful. You can register at the link I'm about to put in the chat. Then you can look for future Doc Chats on NYPL's calendar, research letter, and social media. There it goes into the chat. Zulay, Richard, thank you for powering through internet problems and everything else. This was such a wonderful way to kick off Doc Chat and so excited to have you guys here.

ZULAY CHANG: Thank you.

RICHARD CHEU: Thank you. You know, I see so many comments. That's why I put my email address there at St. John's and anyone who wants to contact me and continue the conversation. I had to change computers twice in rooms three times, that's why I don't have an audio, video, but I made it.

JULIE GOLIA: Glad you made it, Richard.

RICHARD CHEU: Great. Thank you so much.

ZULAY CHANG: Thanks, everyone.

JULIE GOLIA: Thank you, everybody. See you next week.

RICHARD CHEU: Bye bye.

ZULAY CHANG: Bye.