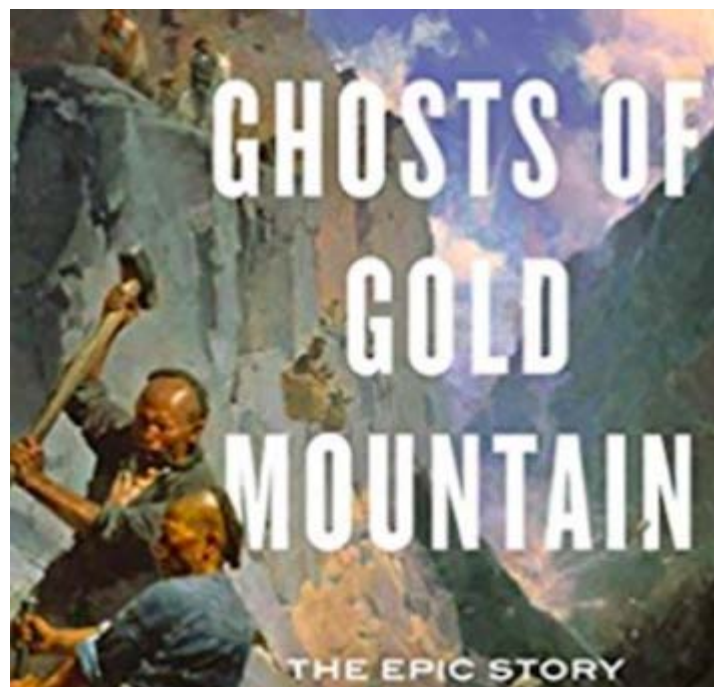


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Golden Spite

How the Chinese United America With a Railroad...and then were Driven Away

May 15, 2019 Michael Giltz

Who built the Transcontinental Railroad? In your schooldays, you were probably dimly aware that two main companies built the railroad, with one racing from the East and the other from the West. You've almost certainly seen that iconic photograph from the day a ceremonial gold spike was hammered down to mark completion. Two trains meet head on, their drivers reaching across the divide to shake hands.



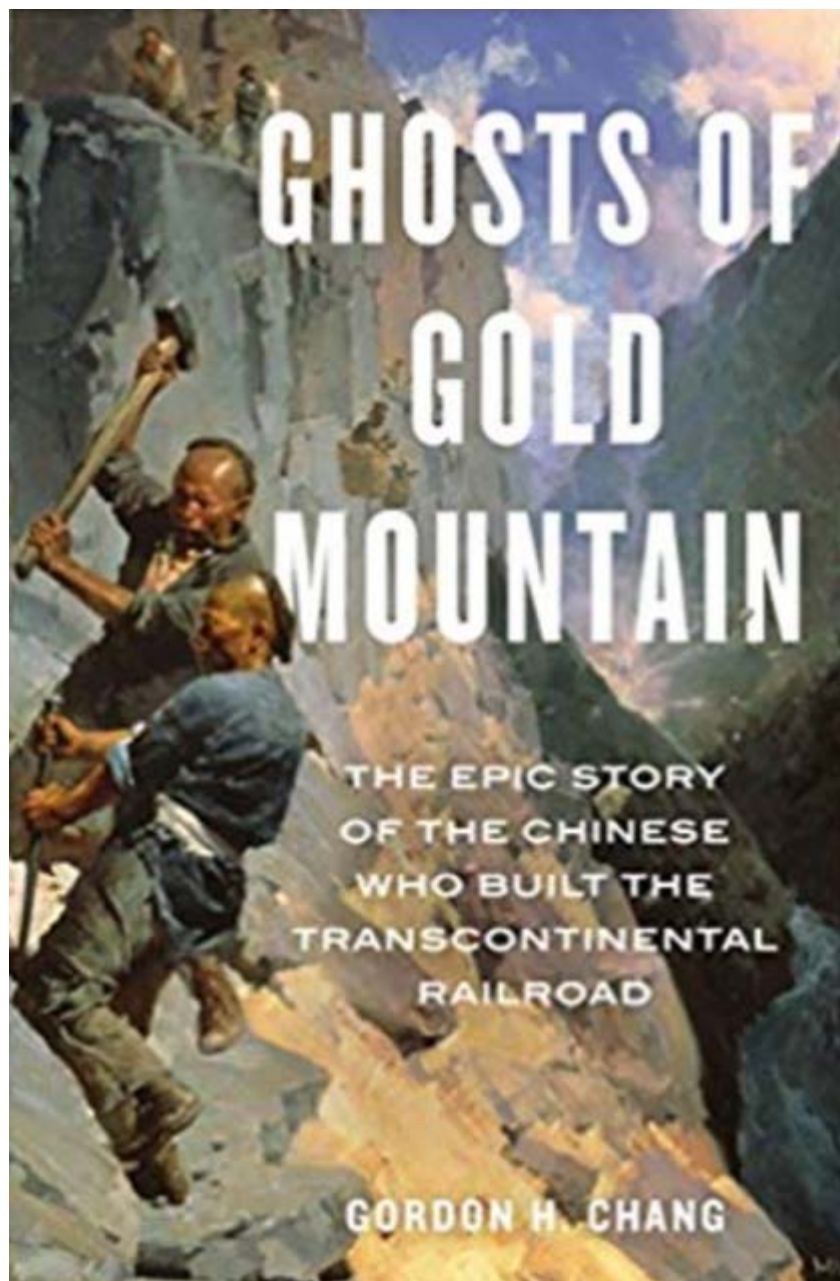
Maybe you even watched the AMC TV series *Hell On Wheels*. That focused much more on the eastern team working for the Union Pacific. They laid more than 1000 miles of track and the crews involved a remarkable collection of people: former soldiers who fought on both sides of the Civil War, black men who had been enslaved alongside those looking to keep them in chains, a lot of Irishmen and constant attacks from Native

Americans who saw their homelands encroached on and their treaties violated.

It's easy to see why they turned such a combustible mix into a TV series. It's even easier to cynically understand why, for most of its run, the show didn't focus much on the crews laying track from the West coast and racing east. That team laid "just" 700 miles of track, but under conditions that were almost impossibly challenging, making their accomplishment even more noteworthy. They worked harder and faster and produced better-quality work every step of the way, hammering over and around and through mountains in horrific weather conditions.

The Chinese achieved that feat of engineering and super-human endurance. They played a key role in binding America, turning a collection of states divided by north and south into a country that stretched from east to west. And we soon forcibly erased their role.

An Epic Labor



In *Ghosts Of Gold Mountain*, historian Gordon H. Chang of Stanford University struggles to tell their story. He begins with a remarkable fact. The Central Pacific company employed some 20,000 Chinese, making up 90% of the crews. Most came from China and many returned home. Thousands of letters flew back and forth across the ocean all the time. And yet despite years of effort, no one has discovered a single letter written by a Chinese working on the transcontinental railroad.

Chang diligently tells their story anyway. He pulls from diaries and letters written by Chinese who immigrated to America at the same time under similar conditions, looks at Chinese who worked on railroads in Canada a little later, and uncovers family lore. He draws on newspaper articles and private correspondence of railroad officials, intently studies photographs and even imaginatively draws conclusions from Chinese artifacts found along the construction route.

At times, the sparse information forces Chang into unseemly, unhistorian-like speculation. But by and large, his effort feels like a studious and admirable magic trick. By marking out the information all around their efforts, Chang creates a compelling outline of what the Chinese achieved. Then he fills it in with information on how they lived and worked and interacted with themselves and others.

And what an achievement for them and the country. They did superior work, organized the largest workers strike in US history up to that point, and beat their east coast counterparts in head-on competition. Then the Chinese topped themselves by laying ten miles of track in one day, an unheard-of feat. Again and again, they won the grudging respect of their white employers, journalists, and countless outsiders. Politicians and businessmen profiting from their work extolled the Chinese and saw them as key and welcome new contributors to the American dream.

Then that acceptance vanished. The Transcontinental Railroad bound the country but it also brought a flood of Easterners who saw the Chinese as foreign, a yellow peril interfering with their fresh prospects. A recession made others resent the Chinese even more as competitors for scarce jobs.

Mobs attacked, beat, harassed, robbed and killed the Chinese. A Chinese person couldn't testify against a white person in court. No jury would convict a white man of murder when all he murdered was a Chinese. We denied the Chinese a chance to become naturalized citizens until the 1940s. A mass lynching killed more people at one hanging than ever before in US history, all of them Chinese.

Moments earlier, it seemed, the elites were hoping hundreds of thousands of Chinese would come to the US permanently. Instead, once they sweated and died for the railroad, their numbers dropped precipitously. The many who died and the many who left and the few who stayed became ghosts of history, all but forgotten at times except for a passing reference to "coolies." (A word probably derived from a Chinese phrase meaning "bitter work.")

For decades, Chinese would diligently track down the resting place of workers on the railroad and either ceremonially honor them or better still send their bones home to China. It's a duty and privilege, for the Chinese

spirit will remain restless unless it can be interred and honored by their descendants. Now, with this admirable work, Chang has done the same.

(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; May 7, 2019)

Tags: Ghosts Of Gold Mountain, Gordon Chang, Hell On Wheels, transcontinental railroad

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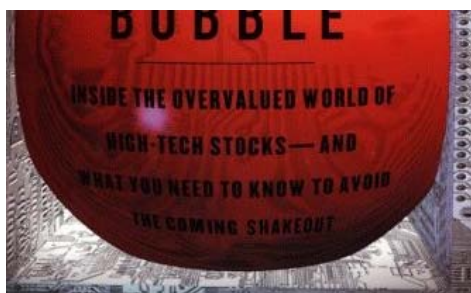
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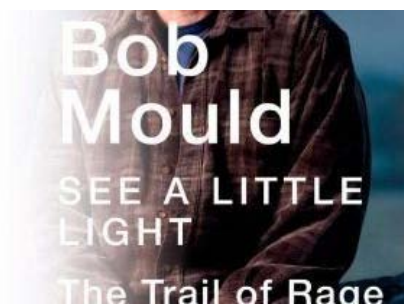
Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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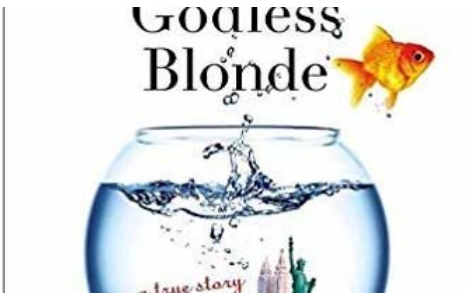
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