

Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit

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From 1880 to 1885, about seventeen thousand Chinese workers made a dangerous voyage across the Pacific Ocean to British Columbia (B.C.). Like thousands of Chinese before them, they came to Canada, “The Gold Mountain”, in search of a better life. Therefore, they agreed to take on the most treacherous tasks and endure harsh living conditions to build the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). The film, *Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit* traces the steps of the early Chinese pioneers in B.C. and documents the sacrifices and discrimination they continued to face even after building the CPR. In this essay, I evaluate this film from factual, historical, and emotional points of view.

Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit is a documentary film which factually reflects the Chinese workers arriving in Canada to build the CPR. Based on the pictures and interviews with their descendants, the reality of the film is indisputable. For instance, a black and white picture in film taken in 1885 shows CPR President Sir William V. Home in Craigellachie, B.C., driving the last spike of Canada’s first coast-to-coast rail line. Another example is that one of the people interviewed in the film, Jangze, recalls hearing how his father, Cheng Foo, had to wrap his feet in burlap sacks in order to stay warm during the winters. Such examples make this history seem to be happening today.

Moreover, the film recognizes the historical significance of the Chinese workers to Canada. The construction of the CPR was completed on November 7, 1885 when the last spike was driven. The railway united Canada’s east and west; therefore, the threat of B.C. joining the United States had been averted. Also, the CPR gave new life to B.C. As Canada’s first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, said, without the Chinese workers, the Canadian Pacific Railway could not have been completed on time, and the development of the west would have had to wait. Obviously, the contributions of the Chinese workers and their legacy have a special place in Canadian history.

This film is a moving depiction of the early Chinese railway workers. Thousands of them sacrificed their lives for the prosperity and territorial integrity of Canada. According to the film, “One Chinese worker died for every mile of the railroad.” Furthermore, from 1880 to 1885, about “4,000 Chinese workers lost their lives” because of difficult working conditions. A descendant of a Chinese worker said, “The life of Chinese railway workers was very hard. He worked 12 hours a day six days a week. He got paid 75 cents a day, whereas a white man was paid a dollar fifty a day.” Therefore, from the film we know that Chinese life in Canada was cheap and sorrowful.

In conclusion, the film does an excellent job in suggesting that Canada owes a debt of recognition to the seventeen thousand Chinese workers who built the CPR. They paid for the future of Canada with their lives when they sacrificed their health, safety, and freedom to return home. The film raises awareness of the oppression and discrimination that also constitutes part of Canadian history.

Reference

Canadian steel, Chinese grit. (1998). Vancouver, B.C.: Moving Images Distribution.