

# Chinese laborers hidden in plain sight

Shen-chih Cheng's evocative photographs give a voice to the Chinese immigrants who labored on the First Transcontinental Railroad more than a century ago

BY CATHERINE SHU  
STAFF REPORTER

In 1869 the First Transcontinental Railroad was finished, connecting the east and west coasts of the US by rail for the first time. The final spike was driven into the juncture of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines at a ceremony in Promontory Summit, Utah. A famous photo taken that day captures railroad executives surrounded by a host of workers. But there is a notable absence. The faces of the Chinese laborers who constituted the majority of the workforce of the Central Pacific Railroad's line that snaked east from California are missing.

The contribution of Chinese immigrants to the creation of the First Transcontinental Railroad is still overlooked, even by the Chinese-American community, says Taiwanese-American photographer Shen-chih Cheng (鄭森池).

"Just about a couple weeks ago, California state officially issued an apology to all Chinese about the anti-Chinese movement," wrote Cheng in an e-mail from Los Angeles, referring to discriminatory laws in place from the 1870s to the 1940s. "But there were few reactions in the Chinese community here. I really don't know why that happened."

Cheng's exhibition, *Walking the Grade* (竟金山路), is on display at the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts (關渡美術館) until Sept. 20. It captures historic sites connected to the Chinese immigrants who worked on the Central Pacific Railroad. The laborers themselves may be long gone, but Cheng's lush, highly evocative black-and-white prints give life to their campsites and the original 19th-century railroad grades they painstakingly worked on.

The eight photographs in *Walking the Grade* are all silver gelatin prints, a photographic process that was invented in the late 1800s and lends Cheng's work an eerie, timeless quality. Highlights include a photo of an old tent



**Bloomer Cut:** Bloomer Cut along the First Transcontinental Railroad was carved out of the mountainside by 40 men using gunpowder and hand tools and is still in daily use.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHEN-CHIH CHENG

frame from a Chinese railroad workers' campsite in the Nevada desert; another is of ghost town Lucin, Utah, taken from the distance with clouds hovering in the sky.

Cheng conducted an immense amount of research during the

## EXHIBITION NOTES:

**WHAT:** *Walking the Grade* (竟金山路)

**WHERE:** Taipei National University of Arts — Kuandu Museum of Arts (台北藝術大學關渡美術館), 1 Xueyuan Rd, Beitou Dist, Taipei City (台北市北投區學園路1號). Tel: (02) 2896-1000

**WHEN:** Until Sept. 20. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 5pm

**ON THE NET:** kdmofa.tnua.edu.tw

three years he spent tracing the footsteps of Chinese laborers, which included locating sites along the First Transcontinental Railroad with railroad historian G.J. "Chris" Graves. As many as 12,000 Chinese laborers, most from southern China, worked on the Central Pacific Railroad. Many had been lured to California by the gold rush but racist laws and regulations prevented them from mining once they arrived.

Railroad executives were originally dubious about hiring the immigrants, who they deemed physically too small to perform arduous manual labor, but Charles Crocker, one of the presidents of Central Pacific, dismissed their concerns. "The Chinese made the Great Wall, didn't they?" he said.

Researching the railroad gave Cheng

a chance to trace not just the footsteps of the Chinese laborers, but also those of the photographers who preceded him in capturing the First Transcontinental Railroad. His favorite photo in the exhibit is *Cape Horn Looking East*, which was taken in the Sierra Nevada mountain range. While the railroad was being built, photographer Alfred A. Hart climbed on top of a steam engine to take a photo of the train as it made its way along Cape Horn and the American River gorge.

"There is a legendary story behind [the photo] and I finally made it to the place. The scenery was pretty after heavy rain. Finally, I stood in the same spot as official Central Pacific Railroad photographer Alfred Hart did some 140 years ago," says Cheng.



▲ **China Wall:** China Wall in the Sierra Nevada mountains protected the railroad from avalanches and was built by mostly Chinese laborers.

◀ **Cape Horn Looking East:** Shen-chih Cheng took this photo in the Sierra Nevada mountain range at a point where the tracks run along steep inclines.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHEN-CHIH CHENG

Following the historic path of the First Transcontinental Railroad is just one part of a larger project to document sites connected to the history of the Chinese in California. The idea originated in 1980, when Cheng was working in San Francisco. His then-girlfriend, now his wife, was living in Sacramento, the capital city of California, and every weekend Cheng would travel north to meet her.

"We visited some places in the Sacramento area, specifically the gold rush-era sites, and learned that they all have Chinese involvement," says Cheng. One of the sites that caught Cheng's attention during the couple's day trips was Locke, a small town that was built by Chinese merchants for themselves in 1915 and retains many of its original buildings.

"I liked this town so much. Its photographic and historical texture really attracted me deeply. I started to photograph [Locke] and thought to go beyond and do more old Chinese sites," says Cheng. He put aside the idea to focus on work and family obligations, but picked it up again in 2005, when he was back in the area visiting his wife's ailing father. After his father-in-law passed away, Cheng made the decision to start photographing historic sites connected to Chinese immigrants at every opportunity he got. *Walking the Grade* was born out of the project, which Cheng says he expects to spend the rest of his life on.

"When I started 29 years ago, there was not much information to gather but a few books. Now, through the Internet, I have too much information. There are always too many places and too little time," says Cheng.

# A realist in cubist clothing

TFAM's retrospective of Lai Chuan-chien's work introduces viewers to both the artist's oeuvre and the influence of Taiwan's local traditions

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
STAFF REPORTER

Lai Chuan-chien's (賴傳鑑) artistic career almost ended before it began. Born in Chungli in 1926, he gained early recognition for his brushwork, winning several competitions which in turn opened the door for him to move to Japan in the early 1940s to study art. But when the tide turned against Japan in World War II, he was forced to abandon his training there and return to Taiwan.

Lai's abrupt departure from Japan is one of many anecdotes recounted by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) in its new exhibition, *Lai Chuan-chien: 80th Anniversary Retrospective* (賴傳鑑八十年回顧展). The oddly titled show (isn't it three years late?) traces the evolution of Lai's tremendous career, beginning with his Japanese-inspired realist pieces. Though Lai's Japanese roots are evident throughout the show, his later works also reveal the long-lasting influence of cubism and abstract art, styles that shaped many artists of Lai's generation.

Lai's early pieces echo the approach of other Japanese-trained artists working in Taiwan in the immediate aftermath of the war. Painting the people and places around him, Lai employs a realist style, emphasizing a stable, three-dimensional perspective and highlighting the play of light through his use of white.

*Old Gate as Before* (老門依然) depicts the interior of Lai's father's store, while *Early Summer* (初夏) is a portrait of his sister. Both use earthy-brown tones, the former suffused with yellows, the latter with shades of green. Like many of his paintings from the 1950s, they reflect Lai's romantic perception of his hometown.

Though such pieces were recognized by numerous exhibitions, Lai nevertheless believed that his artistic training was incomplete. In addition to studying on his own, he soon found a mentor in Li Shih-chiao (李石樵). A respected artist, Li's investigations into cubism helped shape Lai's development.

Li's influence is visible in *Fishing (I)* (漁 (1)). Wisps of sky blue and malachite streak across a colorful sea of geometrical and fragmented blocks, a medley of saturated reds and dull yellows and oranges. Lai's fondness for visible brushstrokes infuses the work with a tactile quality, increasing the viewer's sense of movement and perspective. While *Peacock* (孔雀), from this same period, uses a similar cleavage of color, Lai employs a cold palette of blues in place of the warm reds and yellows of *Fishing (I)*.

Lai's later canvases from the mid-1960s reveal an artist in the throes of experimentation with cubism, as well as abstract and more concrete styles. Though the former two tend to take precedence, an element of realism pervades Lai's work in the latter part of the decade, meshing with the indeterminacy of abstract art and the blocks of perspective distinct to cubism.

*Market (1)* (市場 (1)) combines the distinct outlines of sitting figures, forms that fill a scene dominated by geometric shapes of bold color. This painting, as well as its complementary piece, *Market (2)* (市場 (2)), represents an early manifestation of the subject matter (female nude) and color (hints of purple, blue and yellow pastel within a framework of warm hues)



Lai Chuan-chien, *Early Morning of Budapest*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TFAM

## EXHIBITION NOTES:

**WHAT:** Lai Chuan-chien: 80th Anniversary Retrospective (賴傳鑑八十年回顧展)

**WHERE:** Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Tel: (02) 2595-7656

**WHEN:** Until Sept. 27. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9:30am to 5:30pm, open until 8:30pm on Saturdays

**ADMISSION:** NT\$30

that would come to characterize Lai's later work.

As his style develops, Lai enhances the contours of the female figure by

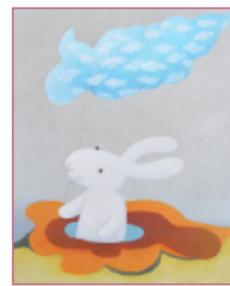
merging shades of brown with yellow, as evidenced by both *Messenger of Spring* (春之使者) and *Summertime* (夏日). This technique eventually results in the fully detailed figure visible in *Summer Day Travel Sentiment* (夏日旅情).

Though Lai's post-1980s paintings are likewise filled with blocks of alternating perspective and pure color, such pieces also mark a return to his realist roots. This shift in style is reflective of the broadening influence of Lai's extensive travels. The warm colors and totemic images visible in *Abundant Harvest* (豐收) and *Horse Riding* (三人行) evoke the primitivism of Paul Gauguin, an homage inspired by Lai's experiences in Taiwan's outlying islands. *Early*

*Morning of Budapest* (布達佩斯之晨) and *Overlooking Prague* (布拉格展望) are suffused with a pastel play of light and rhythmic aura, both of which are reminiscent of Paul Cezanne.

Retrospectives offer a window into the development of an artist's career. In exploring the evolution of Lai's work, TFAM embarks on a complex journey through both the artist's stylistic progression and the historical context within which he operated. Though Lai's art is characterized by its amalgamation of contemporary and traditional techniques, his ability to combine these disparate styles into an original whole is unique, a talent that distinguishes him as one of Taiwan's most important modernists.

## EXHIBITIONS



Catch a Bunch of Jolly Clouds in the Gloomy Weather by Huang Ben-rei.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ESILITE GALLERY

Taiwanese contemporary artist Huang Ben-rei (黃本蕊) examines the relationship between her imagination and contemporary society in *Last Night Butterfly Brought Me Dreams*. The paintings on display provide a window into Huang's universe through their central subject, Nini, the artist's recently deceased rabbit and the inspiration for these 20 paintings.

■ Esilite Xinyi Bookstore (誠品信義店), 5F, 11 Songgao Rd, Taipei City (台北市松高路11號5樓). The gallery is open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 8789-3388 X1588

■ Until Sept. 1

Taiwanese illustrator Red Capsule (紅膠囊) branches out into painting with *Mr Red Solo Exhibition* (花雨使者—柔軟天才的柔軟紅膠囊展). Though the medium is different, the artist retains the same dreamlike images—some frightening, others humorous—that are hallmarks of his visual style.

■ Capital Art Center (首都藝術中心), 2F, 343, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段343號2樓). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 7pm. Call (02) 2775-5268 for more information

■ Until Aug. 28

Belgian ceramist Antonino Spoto's work, on display in *Containers That Are No More Containing*, employs geometrical forms such as cylinders and spheres to create unique and simple bowls and basins fired in hues of vibrant orange and yellow.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶瓷博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Township, Taipei County (台北縣鶯歌鎮文化路200號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 9:30am to 5pm and Saturdays and Sundays from 9:30am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 8677-2727

■ Until Aug. 16

**Self-Modification** (自我的重塑) is a solo exhibit by Tang Jo-hung (唐若洪), the 2008 Liao Chi-chun Oil Painting Award grand prizewinner. The artist culls symbols from disparate media to investigate issues of identity through realistic paintings of his dog, *Cookey*.

■ Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9:30am to 5:30pm and until 8:30pm on Saturdays. Tel: (02) 2595-7656

■ Until Sept. 27

**Writing Words, Writing Forms — Me** (寫字·寫相—我) is a solo exhibit by Ho Chia-hsing (何佳興). Ho's illustrations merge poetry with drawing as a means of looking at the relationship between sight and bodily sensations.

■ Shin Leh Yuan Art Space (新樂園藝術空間), 15-2, Ln 11, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段11巷15-2號). Open Wednesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 8pm. Tel: (02) 2561-1548

■ Until Aug. 16

**Land, Life & Love** (大地·生命與愛戀) is a solo exhibit by Taiwanese artist Hwang Buh-ching (黃步青) of his early oil paintings, which are intimately bound up with Taiwan's natural environment.

■ Jin-Zhi Gallery (金枝藝術), 41-3 Sinfu Village, Yuanli Township, Miaoli County (苗栗縣苑裡鎮新復里41-3號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 6pm. For a viewing call (03) 786-4858

■ Until Sept. 20

New York-based artist Joshua Balgos' video *Whatever It Takes* explores an individual's obsession with the perfect body, the ideal job and the relationship that everyone dreams of.

■ Taipei National University of Arts — Kuandu Museum of Arts (台北藝術大學關渡美術館), 1 Xueyuan Rd, Beitou Dist, Taipei City (台北市北投區學園路1號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 5pm. Tel: (02) 2896-1000 X2432

■ Until Sept. 20