

Evidence and Interpretation Video Transcript

This series introduces six concepts to help you to think about history.

In this session, we focus on evidence and interpretation as we examine sources of information about Chinese workers building the Canadian Pacific Railway in the late 19th Century. How might we find out about these workers? We could read a history textbook, but we might wonder where the authors got their information. And have they described the situation accurately? Obviously, historians read books written by other historians. But where do they get their information? Ultimately, the sources of all historical information are the original artifacts, document, drawings, photographs and written and oral descriptions created in the past that have survived into the present.

We call these primary sources. They are the “raw materials” upon which all historical conclusions are based? Historians use primary sources to create accounts of the past as the way carpenters use wood to build chairs. The term secondary source refers to any textbook and other historical account that is constructed from primary and other secondary sources.

We can begin by asking a very basic question, of any primary or secondary source: Can we trust the source of information? Should we believe what it reveals about the past? Information gathered from artifacts and historical objects is to be trusted if only the objects are authentic, if they are not forgeries. Accounts or descriptions of the past are trustworthy only if the people providing this information are qualified to report on the topic.

For example, to learn about Chinese experiences, it would be informative to read the letters and diaries of Chinese workers who actually built the railway. Sadly, these kinds sources do not exist. Official company records and the diaries of other railway workers, provide some information. They reveal that Chinese workers were paid a dollar a day, which was less than any other worker. And that they received no pay during the winter months, even though they were stuck in the camps. But these sources likely represent the impressions that outsiders had of the personnel experiences of the Chinese workers.

It might seem the photographs, provide highly reliable information, but like any source, pictures can be misleading and incomplete. Here is a photograph showing officials in British Columbia driving the last spike joining the final sections of the railway on November 7, 1885. The second photograph, taken on the same day after all the dignitaries have left, shows the workmen driving their own last spike. Looking closely we see some Chinese faces within the group. Whereas, the official photograph, contains none. Based on the official photograph, we might incorrectly conclude that Chinese workers were not present. And yet, we know that 6,000 of the 9,000 workers who built the British Columbian section of the railway were Chinese. The absence of Chinese workers in the official photograph doesn't prove that they weren't present, merely, that their contributions may not have been valued.

Another key question to ask is: Do the sources provide evidence that is relevant to the question we want to answer? The evidence that can be drawn from historical sources depends on the question we ask. If we want to know about the owners' attitudes toward Chinese workers, then the official last spike photograph is the revealing source. However, if our focus is the attitudes of Chinese workers toward the railway, then the fact that they participated in a separate ceremony suggests that they took some satisfaction in completing the job.

And finally we can ask: Does the evidence support the interpretation offered? We must be careful to check that the interpretation does not go beyond what can reasonably be concluded from the sources, and where possible, to consult several sources to confirm an interpretation.

Here's a telegram from a Canadian official in London to Prime Minister John A. McDonald. It refers to a newspaper report that 2,000 Chinese railway workers had died in one year. The official's requesting that the Prime Minister confirm or deny the accuracy of this report. Based on the telegram, we can't be sure whether the reported number is accurate. We would need corroboration with others sources: perhaps by gathering information on the number of tombstones in the cemeteries where Chinese workers were buried. It is interesting to note that this telegram corroborates the suggestion that officials may have been indifferent in the contributions made by Chinese workers. The reason for advising the Prime Minister was not to request greater protection for the workers, but to warn the Prime Minister that news of the number of deaths was discouraging potential English immigrants from wanting to come to Canada.

Interpretations corroborated for various reliable sources help us to create more complete pictures of the past. So, what have we learned? When examining historical evidence, ask these questions. Can we trust the source of information? Do the sources provide evidence that is relevant to the questions we hope to answer? And finally, does the evidence support the interpretation offered?

Evidence and interpretation...that's it!