

The SILENT SPIKES

Chinese Laborers and the Construction of North American Railroads

compiled and edited by Huang Annian

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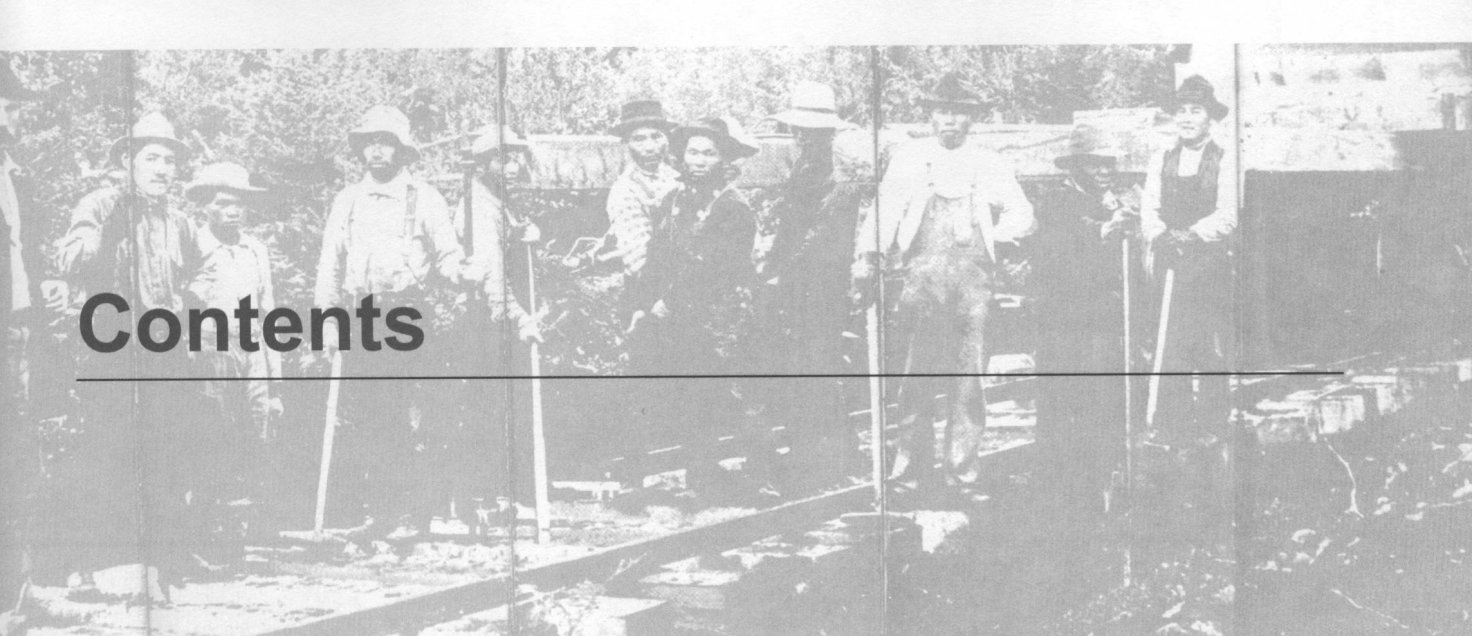
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Contents

Preface 4

I. Voyage across the Pacific Ocean and the Pursuit of Golden Mountain

Dreams 10

II. The Vanguard in the Construction of the American Pacific Railroad 34

1. The Unprecedented Central Pacific Railroad 38

2. Chinese Laborers and the Construction of the Central Pacific Railroad 49

3. The Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad 65

4. The Hard Lives of Chinese Laborers 84

III. The Vanguard in the Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway 104

IV. Unselfish Contributions and Immortal Monuments 142

Postscript 164

Notes 167

Appendix I Sources of the Pictures 170

Appendix II Selected Bibliography 171



Preface

In the 1860s and 1880s, the transcontinental Pacific Railroads had been completed in the United States and Canada, which stood as eternal monuments of both countries in their march toward modernization, national unity and ethnic harmony. The construction of both railroads depended upon the great efforts of pioneering Chinese laborers who had come to North America one century and a half ago. It was this brave, industrious, economic, and quiet labor force that had made indelible contributions to the completion of the two Pacific Railroads.

At the critical moment of the Civil War in 1862, the Lincoln Administration made the great decision to build the Pacific Railroad. May 10, 1869, an epochal moment in the American history 137 years ago, marked the completion of the first transcontinental railroad (the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad) in America. After seven years of continuous and concerted efforts, the two railroad building forces finally joined at Promontory Point north of Ogden in Utah, with the work force of the Central Pacific Railroad building eastward from Sacramento, California, and the work force of the Union Pacific Railroad building westward from Omaha, Nebraska. It was hardworking and intelligent Chinese laborers who had undertaken the most difficult task of building the western section of the Pacific Railroad. Their epic feat of completing the building of the railroad marked the integration of American economy into a whole, and the entry of the United States of a period of rapid economic development. America thus became a country spanning the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. The event also indicated that early Chinese immigrants in the United States had made extraordinary contributions to the development of American economy, especially the rise of American West (California is a case in point).

In 1871 the newly established Canadian government decided to build a similar Pacific Railroad that would link the eastern and western coast of Canada. In April 1880, the ground of railroad construction was broken, but the project proceeded very slowly. From 1881 to 1885 tens of thousands of Chinese workers pushed their way through the impenetrable mountains of British Columbia with simple tools like hammers and



crowbars, and drove the last spike into the rail at Craigellachie on November 7, 1885. The transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railroad played an irreplaceable role in the promotion of national unity and economic growth of the country.

Chinese laborers had made tremendous sacrifices in the construction of the transcontinental railroads in North America. These nameless heroes laid the tracks of the transcontinental railroads. Like the numerous silent spikes, they merged their lives with the railroad tracks. Many Chinese laborers had undertaken the most intensified and dangerous work and many of them had died in the alien lands from diseases, extreme cold, overworking, collapse of tunnels, snow slides and accidents like falling off the cliffs. They not only worked for very meager wages, but also suffered from racial discrimination, injustices and waves of anti-Chinese movements. However, the Chinese laborers endured the humiliations, and persevered. They wrote laudable historical chapters with their sweats and blood. The *Report of the Congress Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration in 1877* was a historical witness of American anti-Chinese movements and Chinese contributions in the opening up of American West. It indicated that without Chinese laborers it was impossible to complete the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad according to schedule. They undertook the most difficult part of work in the building of the Pacific Railroad and made the heaviest sacrifices. They were the most industrious, excellent, and cheapest of all workers. However, they were given unequal treatment with White American workers by American government and the railroad companies. According to American creeds of freedom, democracy, industry, economy and human rights, its national policy of free immigration in the nineteen century and its rule of equal competition in a free market economy, Chinese laborers should receive more equitable treatment and more objective estimation. They deserved to be hailed as models in contributing to American modernization and in getting along with other ethnic groups.

Chinese laborers' contributions to the development of American and Canadian West were not restricted to the building of railroads. They worked in all walks of life in North American societies, and opened up a sky of their own with indomitable determination,



industry and intelligence. In American western states like California, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and New Mexico and in the West of Canada like British Columbia, Chinese laborers helped extract gold and other minerals, participated in railroad construction, dredged the rivers, and drained the marshes. They raised crops, and grew vegetables and fruits like grapes, apple, walnut, cherry, and oranges, etc., turning swamps into farmlands and California into an orchard. Furthermore, Chinese laborers had also played a unique role in fishery, woolen industry, shoemaking, hat making, cigar making, garment industry, laundry and restaurants, etc. It is true of the earliest Chinese immigrants to Canada. These early Chinese immigrants to North America had become a major force in the Western development of America and Canada, especially in mining, railway building, and farming, and they also served as a medium for cultural exchanges between the East and the West.

Unfortunately anti-Chinese movements arose soon in both America and Canada. The “cheapness” of Chinese labor had become an excuse for Chinese exclusion. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act*. This was the only one law targeted at the people of one country in American history, and had become a most deplorable record in the history of American economic and social development, immigration, politics and human rights. After the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, anti-Chinese sentiment went rampant in Canada. In 1885 Canada passed a discriminatory law to levy Head Tax on each Chinese entering Canada. In 1923 Canada passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act* to forbid Chinese entrance to the country. Under such terrible circumstances, American Chinese and Canadian Chinese endured the humiliations, strived to adapt themselves to the mainstream societies of both countries, and continued to sacrifice for the more diversified cultures of North America.

People can always learn lessons from events of old days. Only by learning lessons from history can we face the future together. The history of Chinese laborers in the construction of the Pacific Railroads in North America indicates that the rise of both America and Canada as economic powers depends partially upon the contributions of Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians. It's absolutely wrong to think that only the efforts of White Americans or White Canadians should be responsible for the development of both countries. Immigration policies are the life lines of continuous economic development of both America and Canada. Chinese laborers' enormous contributions to the development of American West and Canada can not be denied. However, some selfish groups pushed American Congress to pass a *Chinese Exclusion Act*, and thus breached American pledges of liberty, democracy and human rights. American and Canadian people demanded to

treat Chinese immigrants equitably, and far-sighted politicians began to reexamine the immigration policy toward China. President Theodore Roosevelt admitted in his fifth message to Congress in late 1905 that the policy of excluding Chinese laborers had done "grave injustice and wrong" to the people of China, and ultimately to the United States itself. During the Second World War, the United States and China fought side by side as allies against the fascist countries, and the number of Chinese Americans who served in the U.S. army exceeded 13,000, which was 17 percent of the population of Chinese Americans, the largest percentage among all ethnic groups. Chinese Canadians were also recruited into the army during the Second World War, and were dispatched to European fronts. The international war against fascism had deepened the friendship between Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians and other people of both countries. The war also promoted both countries to repeal their *Chinese Exclusion Acts*, and treat Chinese people under their jurisdictions more fairly. On October 11, 1943, at the critical moment of the international war against fascism, President Franklin Roosevelt urged Congress to pass a law repealing all Chinese exclusion acts. He said, "Nations, like individuals, make mistakes. We must be big enough to acknowledge our mistakes of the past and to correct them." He continued, "These measures – long overdue – should be taken to correct an injustice to our friends." On December 17, 1943, Congress promptly passed the *Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act*, declaring the repeal of the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, and President Roosevelt signed it into law. Canadian government also corrected its mistakes in Chinese exclusion, and Canadian parliament enacted laws to repeal its Chinese exclusion acts on June 17, 1947. On June 22, 2006, the Canadian government for the first time formally apologized for the discriminatory Head Tax to all Chinese Canadians.

Anti-Chinese movements were unpleasant episodes in China-U.S. and China-Canada relations. After America and Canada ended its anti-Chinese policies, Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians began to lead a new life. Today millions of Chinese immigrants from China, China's Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, South East Asia, and other parts of the world are actively participating in the development of both countries. The status of Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians has improved prominently, and the composition of their communities has undergone great transformations. In recent years, the number of Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians has increased quickly. In 2002, the population of Chinese Americans has reached 2.5 million, 70% of it belonging to the first-generation Chinese immigrants. In 2005 Chinese Canadians has become Canada's largest ethnic group. Today Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians no longer congregate in the Chinatowns, which have become the place where new immigrants stay temporarily. More than one third of the



3 million Chinese Americans have received at least two-year college education, a proportion higher than that of other ethnic groups. More and more young Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians have become successful scholars, educators, businessmen, and some of them have been well-known in the world. Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians have been trying to enter the mainstream societies of both countries. In the meanwhile, they hold fast to traditional Chinese values like industry and perseverance, pursue the ideal of “Mutual Love, Individual Equality, and Public Interest,” and contribute to the colorful and diversified cultures of North America. They have made unique contributions to the exchanges of Eastern and Western civilizations, the development of North American societies, and to the establishment of friendly relationship between China and the United States and Canada. They have also promoted reform, opening and national unity of China.

With the advance of the times, the roles of the “silent spikes” – the nameless Chinese builders of the North American railroads, have received more and more objective reevaluations. For more than one time American and Canadian government leaders have praised highly of Chinese laborers’ contributions in the building of America and Canada. Chinese leaders too have frequently praised overseas Chinese laborers. Former President of China Jiang Zemin said, “Chinese immigrants emigrated to the United States very early and had contributed greatly to the opening up of American West.” President Hu Jintao said, “In the middle of the nineteenth century tens of thousands of Chinese workers worked together with American people, built railroads through the mountains, made bridges on the rivers, and constructed the transcontinental railroad.” Premier Wen Jiabao said, “Tens of thousands of Chinese workers had participated in the construction of the American transcontinental railroad that links the east and west coast... Many of them had given their lives to the project.” Many historians and social activists commended Chinese laborers’ contributions in the construction of North American railroads, and the history of it has become better known to the world. Many American and Canadian cities and communities erected monuments to commemorate the nameless Chinese laborers’ (the “silent spikes”) enormous contributions as trailblazers. In 1991 the state government of Illinois erected a monument in Shanghai with 3,000 rail spikes, to pay tribute to Chinese laborers’ contribution to American railroad construction. On the monument is inscribed the following message, “Chinese railroad builders were instrumental in bridging America’s western and eastern coasts and in the ultimate unification of the United States.” Perhaps the inscriptions are the best way to honor the Chinese laborers who have given their lives for the construction of the Pacific Railroad.

In this new century of economic globalization and cultural diversity, U.S. (the largest



superpower), Canada (with the largest average land in the world), and China (the largest developing country) should cherish and continue to develop the hard-won friendship between the peoples of their countries. This is a common hope of the peace-loving peoples of the three countries. One hundred years ago Chinese laborers went across the Pacific Ocean in extreme difficulties and constructed the bridges of friendship between the peoples of China and North American countries. Today the Pacific Ocean should become the bonds of cooperation and common progress between the peoples and governments of these countries.

This album contains many precious historical pictures and much detailed descriptions. It realistically depicts the miserable experience of the tens of thousands of overseas Chinese laborers and explores the life of Chinese laborers, ranging from their struggle for survival to their final taking roots in North American societies. It illuminates the enormous contributions of Chinese laborers in the building of North American civilizations. The publication of the album is designed to deepen the understanding of North American Chinese's contribution in the development of the continent, and to promote the traditional friendship between the peoples of China and North American countries. It will contribute to the construction of harmonious and multicultural societies of North America.

The pictures in the album include old historical photos, historical pictures, newspaper and magazine cartoons, historical maps, railroad maps, and historical documents, etc. The album features pictures and descriptions, and lets the pictures tell the stories. The appendix includes sources of the pictures and the selected bibliography, and the postscript describes the process of the compilation and my feelings. To satisfy different readers, the compiler of the album has tried to make the preface, introductions, and bibliography readable and full of great quantity of information and documents. It should be noted that we have to omit pictures depicting the great transformation of the life of Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians after the Second World War because of the restriction of the size of this album.

Huang Annian

Professor of the School of History of Beijing Normal University

on May 9, 2006

(the 137th Anniversary of the Completion of the American Central Pacific Railroad)

I



**Voyage across the
Pacific Ocean and the Pursuit
of Golden Mountain Dreams**

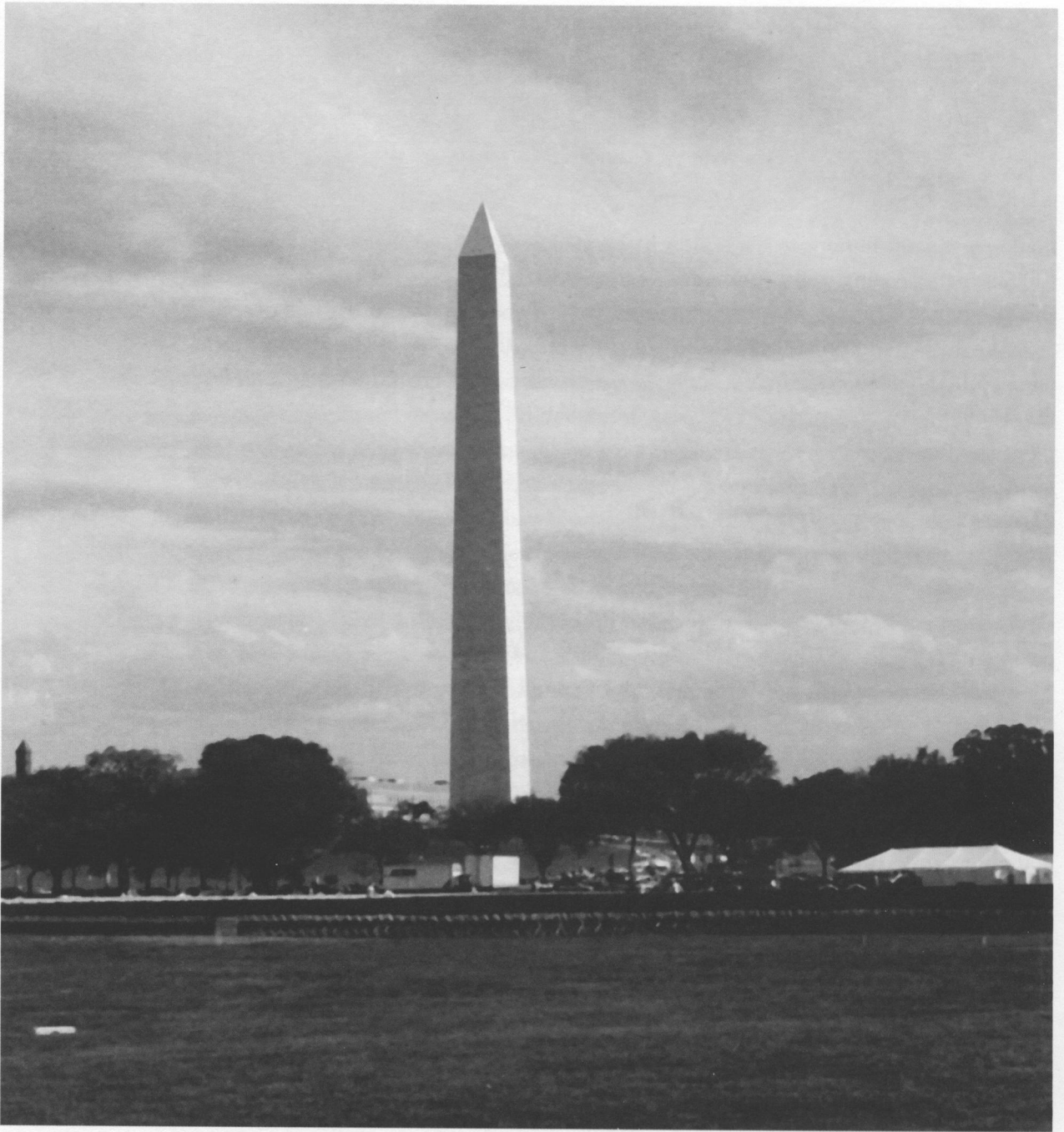


In the middle of the nineteenth century the United States was a prosperous and vibrantly developing country. However, in the presumptuous and isolated Qing Dynasty, it was very unusual for Xu Jiyu, the distinguished scholar of enlightenment of modern China, to eulogize American spirit in his *A Short History of the Maritime Routes*. Most Chinese people knew very little about the United States. In 1840s Americans pushed westward very rapidly. After the Mexican-American War from 1846 to 1848 the United States extended its boundaries to the Pacific coast. In 1848 gold was found near Sacramento, California, and the era of Gold Rush dawned. Then the construction of the Pacific Railroad was started. Hordes of Gold seekers and laborers swarmed into California from everywhere. After the Civil War the United States had an urgent demand for cheap labor because of the rapid progress of industrialization. And after the Opium War China suffered national humiliations from Western powers and was in severe turmoil. The peasants at the bottom of society were plunged into untold sufferings, and the tales of Golden Mountain fabricated by the American merchants greatly appealed to them. Many impoverished peasants from Southern China contracted as coolies, boarded the barques, and after two or three months of voyage on the churning Pacific Ocean, with hunger, lack of water, filthy air, and diseases always threatening their lives, they finally arrived in San Francisco, California to pursue the Golden Mountain Dreams.

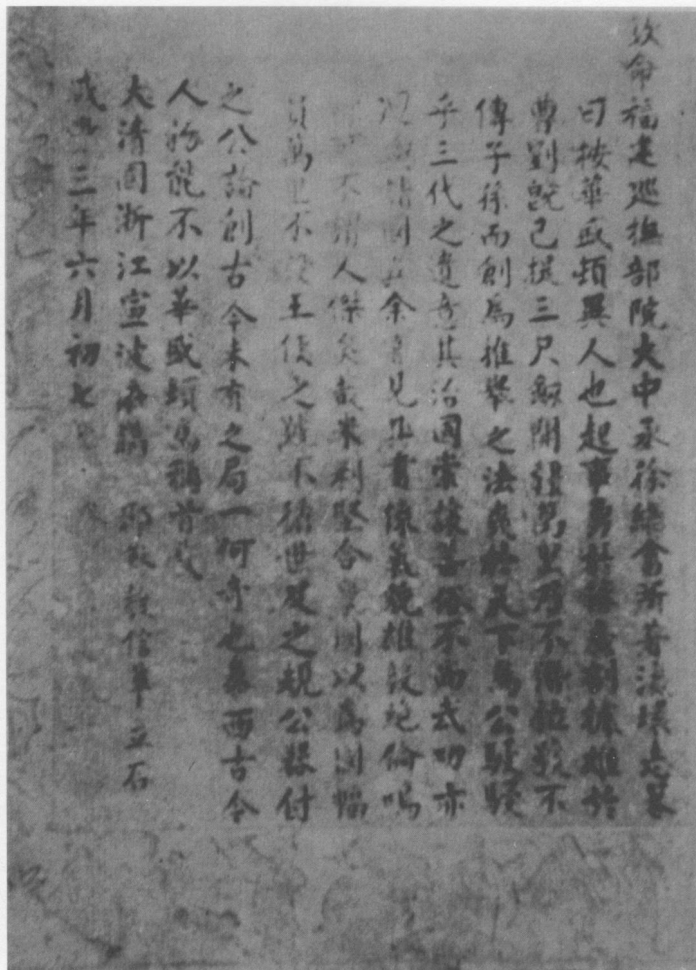
The historians disagree on the number of Chinese in California in 1850s and 1860s. However, they do agree that Chinese are the earliest immigrants from Asia and has a very high proportion among the population of California. Among the early Chinese immigrants, there were recruited laborers, kidnapped "pigs" (which refers to those who had been forced to sell themselves to do hard manual labor in overseas countries. They were known as "pigs" because they seemed to be pigs to be slaughtered – the compiler), merchants, partisans, servants, peasants, and fishermen, etc. Most of them were coolies from Taishan, Xinhui, Kaiping, Enping and other districts of Guangdong Province. When they set their feet on America, they originally chose to live in San Francisco and other towns in Northern California. They were pioneers of the first wave of Chinese immigration. In San Francisco and Sacramento, Chinese immigrants congregated in certain parts of the towns because of differences in language and social customs with White Americans. The earliest Chinatowns thus came into being. Chinese newcomers worked in various occupations like mining, railroad building, cigar making, shoemaking, woolen industry, garment industry, textiles, farming, land reclamation, grapes growing, fishing, street vending, and restaurants, etc., and had

made great contributions to the building of American West and the newly-developed California. According to the estimation of the Secretary of Labor of California in 1866, the number of Chinese who were engaged in gardening in California had reached 30,000, which was 87.6% of all California gardeners. In Sacramento, 86% of all farm labors in the town were Chinese. Some American officials testified, "Without Chinese, the development of American West was unthinkable." "Chinese taught Americans to plant and breed fruit trees, and to harvest crops." "Chinese turned the wilderness into farms, and turned California into a garden and an orchard." "Without the industry of Chinese laborers, the opening up and development of California will be delayed for scores of years." Chinese workers had become the major work force of cigar making, woolen industry, textiles, and shoemaking in California. According to statistics, 50% of the workers in California factories were Chinese in 1872. One insightful observer commented, "Without Chinese labor, the manufactures of California can not survive for a day." Between 1850 and 1870 half of the revenue of California was from taxations on Chinese workers. "In the mines, on the farms, and in the factories of California, it is most ideal to hire Chinese. If the more demanding White workers are employed instead of Chinese workers, the work will have to stop." Zhang Zhidong, the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi of the Qing Dynasty, said in a written statement submitted to the Qing government, "The towns of San Francisco have recruited industrious and frugal Chinese laborers to work at the mines and build the railroads. The profits that the American merchants have fleeced from Chinese workers has reached hundreds of billions." As Liang Qichao pointed out in his *Travel to the New Continent*, the prosperity of California was "actually what our people have created by blood and sweats." All these confirmed Chinese laborers significant contributions to the development of American economy.

However, the Chinese laborers in California had led a very miserable life. Even they wrung gold in abandoned mines by White Americans, they had to pay a mining tax. The miners in China Camps lived in shacks with terrible environment and sanitation. Besides mining, railroad building and farming, laundry, restaurants, barbershops, and groceries were the major means of subsistence for Chinese Americans in late nineteenth century. The work in these trades was strenuous, dull, long in work hours, and low in wages. When Chinese workers came to the Golden Mountains to pursue their dreams, the Civil War was still raging. A few Chinese who had been in the United States for a long period had fought in the Union army in the war against the Southern slavocracy to disintegrate the country.

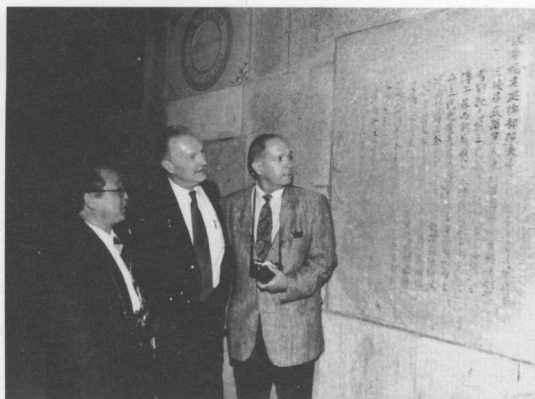


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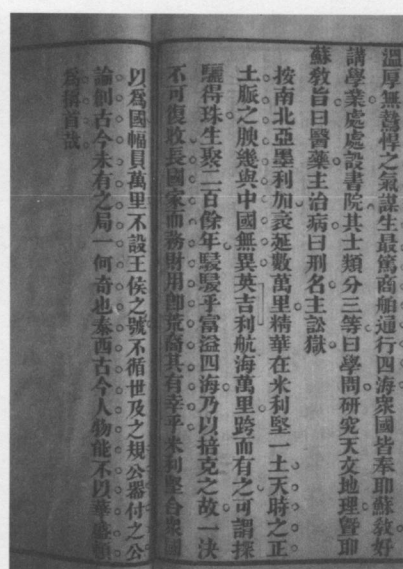
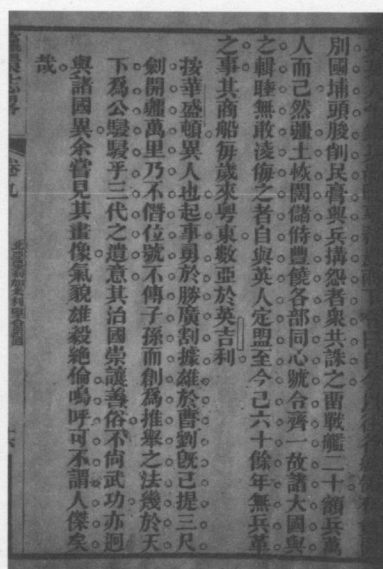
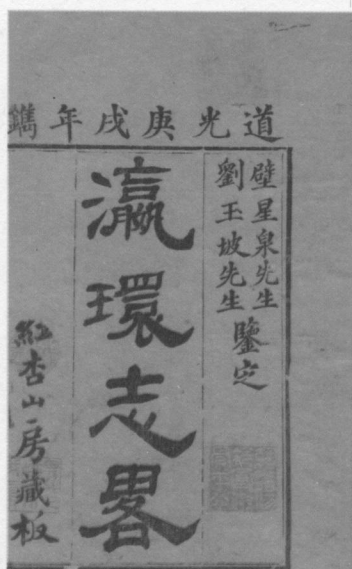
In the monument to American President George Washington is set a stone tablet, which is a gift from the government of China in 1853.^[1] The tablet is 1.6 meters tall and 1.2 meters wide, and is inscribed with monks, flying dragons, warriors, and delicate decorations. The inscriptions, approving the American Revolution and praising President Washington, are neat, dynamic, and beautiful, and are written by Xu Jiyu, former governor of Fujian Province, in his *A Short History of the Maritime Routes* (*Ying Huan Zhi Lue*).^[2] The tablet represents a milestone in early China-U.S. relations, and indicates that Chinese people of the time acclaimed and were eager to learn from the emerging American spirit. On June 29, 1998, former American President Bill Clinton mentioned Xu Jiyu and this tablet in his lecture at Peking University, and recognized it as “a witness of U.S.-China relationship 150 years ago.”^[3]



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Xu Jiuyu (1795-1873) was a scholar of the enlightenment of modern China and a pioneer in establishing China-U.S. relations. He was born in Wutai County, Shanxi Province. He was President of Tongwenguan (College of Foreign Languages). His book *A Short History of the Maritime Routes* (10 volumes) was written when Mr. Xu served as the Governor of Fujian Province, and was based on extensive materials collected from the libraries both home and abroad. It is the earliest one to introduce history and geography of other countries in the world in modern China. In the fall of 1867, Anson Burlingame, American envoy in Beijing, presented a facsimile of George Washington's portrait to Xu Jiuyu on behalf of the U.S. government. When Mr. Xu Jiuyu received the facsimile of portrait, he said, "President Washington of your country had made the first great achievement by creating political systems which will definitely be passed down to later generations." On May 15, 1997, a memorial ceremony was held on the lawn before the Washington monument to commemorate the pioneer of China-U.S. goodwill Xu Jiuyu and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *A Short History of the Maritime Routes*.