

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (July 2001)

By Rob Upson

THE MARCH FROM ROBE TO BENDIGO AND CHINA'S LONG MARCH

On Easter Saturday this year, 15 walkers (13 men and 2 women) arrived at the Golden Dragon Museum after completing a fifteen-day, 518 kilometre walk from Robe in South Australia. This Robe to Bendigo re-enactment walk was undertaken as a tribute to the 16,000 Chinese immigrants who walked to the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s and 1860s.

In 1856 the Colonial Government of Victoria imposed a £10 tax on each Chinese person arriving at the Port of Melbourne. To avoid this tax, ships' captains (who were responsible for paying it) sailed on to South Australia and landed their passengers, initially at Port Adelaide and Kingston, and then at Robe. The Chinese had no alternative but to walk to the goldfields. They took several routes but the one from Robe to Bendigo was generally via Penola, Casterton, Cavendish, Dunkeld, Ararat, Avoca, Maryborough, Maldon and Lockwood. The re-enactment walk took this route.

Russell Jack, President of the Bendigo Chinese Association, was reported as saying about the walk, "*Who would have thought 15 Europeans would put themselves through such a gruelling task over two weeks in appreciation of the Chinese.*" When initially invited to join the team of walkers he laughed and replied, "*Don't be silly, we've already done it once*"

A more significant walk, in the context of Chinese history, took place in China during the years 1934-35. This became known as **The Long March** and lasted 368 days. In order to understand why this march took place it is necessary to know a little about China's political history at the start of the 20th century. Not an easy task in a few words, but here goes.

The Chinese Revolution of 1911 put an end to centuries of dynastic rule and established the Chinese Republic with Dr. Sun Yat-sen as president of the Nationalist Kuomintang Party (KMT). China had essentially been an agrarian economy with the vast majority of its people being peasant farmers working for domineering landlords.

The end of WWI also brought dramatic developments to politics in China. The Treaty of Versailles contained elements highly unfavourable to China, one of which was to give the German concessions in Shantung Province to Japan. Widespread protests, known as the May Fourth Movement, led to the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921. Two years later Mao Tse-tung became their leader and the CCP formed an alliance with the KMT. When Sun Yat-sen died in 1925, General Chiang Kai-shek became the commander in chief.

The alliance didn't last long when, in 1927, Chiang Kai-shek led a successful anti-communist coup. Mao then formed the Red Army and over the next few years built up his forces in southern China. The Kuomintang continually launched major and mostly successful offensives against the Red Army at the same time keeping at bay the Japanese who had invaded Manchuria and Shanghai. Chiang Kai-shek was able to mobilise over half a million troops against the Communists who could only muster about 200,000 poorly equipped men.

In 1934 the Red Army suffered several decisive defeats and were forced to retreat from their base in the mountains of Kiangsi Province. Thus began **The Long March** that covered about 10,000 km and lasted just over one year. The march took them west for about 5,000 km and then northwards a similar distance to Yen'an in Shensi Province. En route, the fugitive rebels crossed 18 mountain ranges, 24 rivers

and 12 Provinces populated by more than 200 million people. They occupied 62 cities and outmanoeuvred the forces of the Nationalist Armies. Between battles and skirmishes, in every town occupied, they called massed meetings, taxed the rich, redistributed food and land, freed many slaves and preached 'liberty, equality, democracy'. Millions saw the Red Army and were no longer afraid of it. Although thousands dropped out along the way, thousands of others joined their ranks.

The only foreigner to take part in the Long March was one Otto Braun. A German communist and married to a Chinese actress, his knowledge of military strategy proved very useful to the Red Army.

Arriving in Shensi Province, Mao and the Red Army were able to consolidate and put all their energies into defeating Japan (which had launched a massive invasion of China in 1937) and uniting the Chinese people around the CCP leadership.

During WWII there was some co-operation between the CCP and KMT forces against the common enemy of Japan but after the war, hostilities soon resumed between the two forces. Within four years the Nationalist Government collapsed and Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan. On the 1st October 1949, Mao Tse-tung stood in Tien An Men Square in Beijing and announced the establishment of The People's Republic of China. The Long March had been a major turning point in the destiny of the Chinese people.

References: Edgar Snow's China

The Walk from Robe (Golden Dragon Museum)