1984-85 marks the fiftieth anniversary of China’s Long March. Jean Bailey recalls some of the stirring incidents of this event and draws attention to political, social and economic consequences arising from it.

Nineteen eighty-four marks the fiftieth anniversary of an event which brought a new idiomatic phrase into the major languages of the world, an event which changed the history of Asia, an event which, to this day, determines actions of a people more numerous than those of Europe and the USA combined.

This event was the Chinese Long March. Because our ties with China grow increasingly strong it is important that we know what the Long March was, know something of its almost legendary happenings, something of its consequences both good and ill.

Main events are soon told.

In October 1934 the Red Army retreated from its base in south-east China pursued by the Kuomintang (moneyed classes and their followers led by Chiang Kaishak). Twisting, turning, redoubling, fighting on the average almost a battle or skirmish a day, they travelled 18,000 km, a distance further than from Beijing (Peking) to New York, than from Sydney to Perth and then back again. In their path lay twenty-four major rivers and eighteen mountain ranges, six of them above the line of perpetual snow. Twelve months later, 20,000 of the 90,000 who set out arrived at their destination — a Red base in China’s north.

Preparations were thorough, even to a needle and thread stuck in the underside of each cap. Morale was high. This is how an Army engineer describes the setting out:

When no enemy was near, whole companies would sing and others would answer .... If it was a black night and the enemy was far away, we made torches from pine branches or frayed bamboo and then it was truly beautiful. When at the foot of a mountain we could look up and see a long column of lights coiling like a fiery dragon up the mountainside. From the summit we could look in both directions and see miles of torches moving forward like a wave of fire.

Jean Bailey
Long March

For five months, they manoeuvred in the southern provinces, eluding, fighting, advancing, retreating, baffling the enemy by diversionary tactics made simultaneously from half a dozen points along their flank. Then, after one last pretended thrust at Kunming (Burma Road terminal), they swung north.

They were now in rough mountainous country where great rivers rush down between immense cliffs from the Tibetan ranges. Few Red Army men could swim but sometimes those that could managed, with the help of skin boats and bamboo rafts, to get rope across and set up makeshift pontoon bridges.

At the well-fortified Yangtse River, Chiang Kai-shek thought he had them. His planes reported that the Red Army had halted to build a bamboo bridge, so Chiang ordered his troops to bear down on this bridge from all sides. But in the dead of night the Red Army left their bamboo bridge and, after an eighteen-hour march, reached one of the few spots where a ferry plied. Here, dressed in Kuomintang uniforms, Red Army men summoned a boat from the northern bank, overpowered an unsuspecting defence force playing mahjong, took over ferries and, working non-stop for nine days and nights, transported the whole Red Army across.

Even more spectacular was the crossing of the flooded Ta Tu River, wider here even than the Yangtse. After a series of adventures, each an epic in itself, the Red Army again captured boats and managed to get at least one division across the rushing, seething Ta Tu. But then Kuomintang planes spotted them and began dropping bombs. So the main force still on the south bank set off on another march, this time to the chain bridge at Lueling. By now, the Red Army was barefoot and their track sometimes those that could managed, with the help of skin boats and bamboo rafts, to get rope across and set up makeshift pontoon bridges.

The way before us is even more difficult than the one behind us. We must cross some of the highest mountains in the world, glacier-clad mountains wrapped in eternal snow. In this vast Tibetan-Chinese borderland are war-like tribes whom for centuries Chinese oppressive landlords and feudal usurers have oppressed. The Red Army's reputation flew ahead of it. It was the poor man's army. It took land from rich landlords and distributed it among peasants and tenants. It cancelled usurers' debts, it set up peasant councils so that even the poorest managed their own affairs. And, unlike the Kuomintang, it did not want to fight other Chinese; it was northward bound to drive out the Japanese.

As individuals, too, Red Army men behaved as had no other soldiers the peasants had ever heard of. They stole nothing, not even a grain of wheat. Borrowed articles were returned, damaged ones paid for. Women were respected. Lattines were dug far from the homes. Wounded men left behind said that the Army rule "Be kind and courteous to each other" was meant to be applied as much to peasants and tribespeople as to fellow Red Army men.

For seventeen days after the Ta Tu crossing, the Red Army rested and re-equipped. Then their commander-in-chief called them together and addressed them:

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When all mountains were crossed, the Red Army rested and re-equipped itself and then set off again. One section crossed was the Grasslands.

The Grasslands. How pleasant Grasslands sounds. But crossing was to prove the Red Army's greatest feat. One historian rates it "undoubtedly the most difficult episode in the history of logistics".

A more apt name than Grasslands would be Icy Swamps. The Grasslands are on a plateau higher than Australia's highest mountain and for over half the year are swept by torrential rain. Except for a maze of narrow strips, high wild grass grows over an ocean of black, ice-cold mud deeper than a man is tall. One false step and a man or a horse sinks from sight. Many did. So narrow were the strips of solid land that men could not lie down at night but slept standing, and for warmth leant against each other. Some tied the high grass over their heads as a defence against the rain; the lucky ones came to bamboo shelters which their advance guard had built for those that followed.

Conditions varied. Sometimes they marched in single file, at others they marched side by side in a long line, all holding hands. Always they were short of food. Always — having no firewood — they ate what they had raw.

For ten days they marched, through the rain-swept, ooze-based Grasslands. The Grasslands took its toll but not nearly so great a toll as it did of their Kuomintang pursuers. These got lost in the maze of swamp and wild grass, and those that were left of them turned back.

Sixteen thousand kilometres now lay behind the Red Army, 2,000 still to go. But at last these kilometres too lay behind and the Red Army, their marching over, joined forces with their northern comrades and with them began a new series of tasks.

All in all, the men of the Long March had passed through eleven provinces in which lived 200,000,000 people. Wherever they had gone they had confiscated great estates and had distributed these among the peasants. In every province they had left little knots of men to help the peasants set up self-governing councils, to teach them how to wage guerrilla warfare. Every day of that year of marching had scaled more strongly the fate of the invading Japanese, every province traversed made yet more certain who would win in the coming struggle between Communists and Nationalists.

The ethos of the Long March lived on after '49. Nothing was too hard. Too hard to rid a quarter of the world's population of venereal disease, prostitution, drugs, gambling, malaria, TB, leprosy? Not a bit of it. When the Red Army said these must go, go they did.

Too hard to get suspicious, individualistic peasantry to cooperate? Had not the members of the Red Army too been suspicious and individualistic when they first joined? Had not they developed a camaraderie of mutual trust and help? So Mutual Aid Teams were born, developed in time into Agricultural Co-operatives, which, in later times, developed into Communes where industry and agriculture worked in harmony.

The ethos of the Long March did not always lead the Chinese the right way. After '49 they carefully set up a democratic structure. But the tradition of Mao-at-the-top which had worked so well with an army on the move, now in civil life persisted right throughout Mao's lifetime, even when old age had made his leadership no longer beneficial.

Perhaps the rectification campaigns with their endless arguing sessions can be traced to Mao's "Conviction not Forced Obedience". Perhaps the many "incidents" on China's border or the excesses of the Cultural Revolution can be traced to that year of danger and never-ceasing vigilance.

Perhaps.

But there is no perhaps as to the effect of the Long March on China's national pride and on her determination to succeed, nor to the effect her achievements have had on other Asian nations, nor indeed to the effect it has had on the whole world's confidence to "Long March" when trouble strikes.