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 Kai-shek). 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 ("twisted like a sheep’s gut" says a participant) went high over mountains and then low again to the flooded water level. Parallel to them on the northern bank were both their own division which had got across and an enemy warlord trying to race them to the bridge. On their own side, hot on their heels, was the Kuomintang.

For two days and nights they marched, with breaks of only ten minutes for rest and meals. They fought a battle at the foggy summit of Wild Tiger Mountain, and another at its foot. Then came a downpour that blackened the night. At first they tried marching with the hand of one man on the shoulder of the man in front. But then, observing that the warlord forces across the river had lit torches, and coming themselves to a hamlet with reed fences, they bought all the fences and made torches too. Soon two long lines of flame "crimsoned the Ta Tu" (Chinese poem).

At daybreak on the third day they reached Lueling. The river narrows at Lueling and rushes between high cliffs. Centuries before, a chain bridge had been slung between these cliffs with wooden planks for flooring. The Red Army should have been safe. Both foes had been outdistanced. The small outposts on the opposite bank would soon be captured.

But what had happened to the bridge? All that met the gaze of the weary Red Army were dangling iron chains. No flooring between. All planks had been removed to a point midway across. Far below, the water churned and frothed. No footing there. No footing on the chains above.

But men have more than feet and soon twenty-two volunteers with guns tied to their backs and grenades tucked in their belts, were clinging to the chains and moving along them hand over hand. Three were struck by bullets and dropped into the foaming river. The others reached midpoint and clambered up only to be greeted by a sheet of flame. The outpost men had spread paraffin and lit it. Through the flames rushed the volunteers. Behind them, other Red Army men were now swinging on the chains, clambering up, dashing through the flames. Unbelieving, the outpost men turned and fled. Shouts of joy rose from the men on the south, and amid them came the thud, thud of felled tree trunk planks falling into place between the dangling chains.

When the pursuing Kuomintang arrived, they found no Red Army, no bridge. This time, even the chain moorings had been destroyed.

The Red Army’s reputation flew ahead of it. It was the poor man’s army. It took land from rich landowners and distributed it among peasants and tenants. It cancelled usurers’ debts, 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. Latrines 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.

Many peasants joined the Red Army. Many Kuomintang deserted to it.

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:

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
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had passed (30,000 men).

machine shouted encouragement until all
covered mountain and the propaganda
red flags fluttered on the top of the snow-
machine who had hurried on ahead. The
colours. It was men from the propaganda
whistling simw bowed to their bright

hoarse voice from above us: "Comrades.'

and deafening thunder-claps. I hen came a
All we could hear were the shouts of people
storm raged as if the very sky was falling.

....

ami splashed down on us.... We held up an

oilskin sheet and huddled under it

....


Hold on. Don't give up! Perserverartce


starts off again. As they neared the
valley where they bivouacked. But rest

others succumbed.

Eventually, they came to a sheltered
valley where they bivouacked. But rest

short was short. To escape Kuomintang
bombers, they rose at midnight and
started off again. As they neared the
pass, a fierce storm broke. Mao Tse-
tung’s batman tells the tale;

"It seemed as if my chest was being
pressed between millstones" records
one man. The stronger hauled at the
weaker, or supported them, or carried
their rifles. Some kept going by
clinging to the tails of transport mules.

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

invasion Japanese, every province
traversed made yet more certain who
would win in the coming struggle
between Communists and National-

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
collaborate? 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 time, 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.

During four decades Jean Bailey
had district responsibility for widely
differing areas of CPA work.
Nowadays she specialises in
writing.