

### **Trouble in China**

China in the 1850's was a poverty stricken, violent place. A series of upheavals including political rebellions, drought and the soporific effect of opium addiction had transformed this cultured and dignified land into a famine-ridden wasteland<sup>1</sup>. Overpopulation was another problem and Chinese families found it impossible to achieve prosperity and security no matter how hard they were prepared to work. As loyalty to family was the strongest cultural value, they looked abroad for opportunities to earn and send monies home to their families rather than to leave their homeland permanently. They were sojourners not immigrants.

The Chinese had for some years been lured to the Californian Goldfields by the promise of gold. Here any man could take his chances and work hard to uncover the riches of the earth that were available to all. They were diligent, quiet workers but their looks and habits that were unfamiliar to the Americans, made them unpopular at the Californian goldfields. The threat of violence was ever present. Eighty-two Chinese miners were murdered in California between 1853 and 1854. Only two murderers were charged for these crimes. It was hard to make a conviction, as evidence from a Chinese person was declared inadmissible by Californian courts. In 1853, Chinese passengers who had arrived at the Californian goldfields after sailing on the ships *Brant*, *Lightening* and *North Carolina* were immediately driven off the goldfields by the Americans.

### **Gold strike in Victoria**

Around the end of 1852, the bloody Taipang rebellion started and it soon devastated Southern and Central China. During this terrible period, more than 600 cities were destroyed in seventeen provinces. About 130 million Chinese people were slaughtered in the conflict or died from disease or starvation. Meanwhile in Victoria, a Chinese immigrant to Australia, Louis Ah Mouy, responded to the opportunity to strike it rich when gold was discovered in Yea. Louis wrote to his brother in Canton encouraging him to come to Australia and make their family's fortune<sup>2</sup>. The news of the Victorian gold strike spread like wildfire encouraged by Chinese agents in partnership with the captains of the foreign ships. They promoted the news throughout the Chinese tea houses. In January 1853, the first two shiploads of Chinese goldseekers arrived in Victoria. The Australian gold strike was the opportunity that they had been waiting for and by 1854, 3,000 Chinese miners had arrived in Victoria heading straight to the goldfields at Ballarat, Bendigo and Mt Alexander<sup>3</sup>.

### **Funding the passage**

How could the would-be miners living in a poverty-stricken land afford to travel to Australia? The fare for the voyage of £10-12 had to be found, as well as money for fees, food and other provisions once they had arrived. Only about a third of the Chinese who took the trip to the goldfields had the money for the fare, with the rest taking out loans. The miners considered it was not risky to borrow that fare as the China ship's agents spoke of limitless opportunities to repay the loan, amass great wealth and come home in glory. To entice them to take out the loans, the ship's agents paid ostensibly independent idlers to follow them through the teahouses a week later and confirm the agents' stories<sup>4</sup>. The miners were further convinced by the popular stories of striking it rich on the goldfields and the folk songs of the time reinforced this message with lyrics such as *Marry your daughter to a Gold Mountain guest; when his ship comes home he will bring a fortune*<sup>5</sup>. The loans were raised with families, village elders, banks and the unscrupulous agents. The contract was such that the loan would be paid back on the chinaman's return together with a third share of the gold he had mined. Security was required, and usually the borrower had no land as security. This meant the Chinaman's family, including his wife and children, became indentured labor and were required to work off the loan for its duration. This was about two years and

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Walk From Robe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2002, Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, Victoria, page 5

<sup>2</sup> Sprengel Wilf; *Robe's Chinese Invasion*, 1986, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 5

<sup>3</sup> *The Walk From Robe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2002, Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, Victoria, page 5

<sup>4</sup> *The Walk From Robe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2002, Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, Victoria, page 6

<sup>5</sup> Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page

would finish when the goldseeker returned with his gold. If the minder did not return in the time specified in the loan agreement, the miner's family would be sold and then continue to work off the loan until it was repaid.

### **Preparation for the Journey**

In the beginning, most of the miners were young, single men who were sent by their families as under Confucian principles they were required to obey their fathers and owed allegiance to their family. The families expected that once the miner has amassed to their quick fortune, he would return home to the village where he would purchase land for the family, build local schools, and build magnificent temples honouring them. Whole villages were involved sending off the prospectors, amassing the gear and provisions needed for the journey. For the voyage on some China ships, they needed to provide their own bedding and rations, which included rice, dried and salt fish, dried vegetables and smoked and pickled duck. These miners would need suitable working clothing, bedding, cooking pots, and prospecting pans and shovels for the goldfields. All these supplies had to be acquired in China while food and perishables for the goldfields would be purchased on arrival. They also wanted to reach the goldfields as soon as they could after arriving in Australia, without the delay of working to buy provisions, so they accumulated money and items for trade to bring with them. These included the *holey dollars* used as currency in their homeland, silver, and items for trade such as inlaid chests, ginger jars, silks, toys and opium.

The preparations and the journey ahead were a massive undertaking and would have been incomprehensible for these little travelled villagers. So, the miners formed well-organised groups where together they planned and prepared for the journey. These groups travelled together, establishing rules and objectives for the members of the group to observe and support each other. The group often appointed a *Headman* who was usually educated and spoke some English, probably learned in Canton, which was an open port to the English. The Headman's role was to accompany the group as an organiser, negotiator and interpreter. He was to deal with the authorities and ships captains, negotiate the purchase of provisions and the services of Australian guides and to act as a debt collector if required<sup>6</sup>.

### **From Village to Ship**

The journey to the goldfields started long before the ships bearing the Chinese reached Australia. First the goldseekers had to trek from their villages, which were mainly in the Sze Zap and Guangdong provinces, to the ports of Amoy and Canton. This took up to three days. There they were transported on overcrowded junks to Hong Kong<sup>7</sup>. Once in Hong Kong, the bewildered travelers, many of whom had never ventured far from their villages before, were accommodated in wretched, agent run shanties while they waited to join their foreign ship. Some of the travelers were frightened and wanted to abandon the venture, so the agents lured them further into debt by introducing them to the vices of gambling and opium addiction. This meant the miners had even less chance of repaying the loans they had raised. If they then failed to undertake the journey, they would be disgraced and a burden to their family. The unfortunates then had no choice but to continue with the contractual arrangements and the journey to the goldfields<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 117

<sup>7</sup> *The Walk From Robe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2002, Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, Victoria, page 7

<sup>8</sup> *The Walk From Robe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2002, Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, Victoria, page 7