

## Cleared out coastwise

### Organisation, victimisation and mythmaking in the walk from Robe.

Of the many episodes that make up the oftentimes exotic impression of Chinese Australian history the walk from Robe to the goldfields of Victoria has repeatedly taken on epic proportions.<sup>1</sup> Its ‘long march’ like length, tales of hardship and death, not to mention present-day outrage at the discriminatory tax the walk was designed to avoid, all combine to make the stuff of legends. Yet remarkably the telling of this history has largely been left to local historians with their characteristic eagerness to retell every tale and make use of every allusion to their subject with little regard to plausibility, contradiction or even relevance.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the arrival of thousands of Chinese gold seekers in the late 1850s at the small South Australian port of Robe in order to avoid taxes imposed by the neighbouring gold rich colony of Victoria is well known, it is surprisingly little understood in detail.

The bare bones of the history is that, frightened at the numbers of Chinese miners flocking to its goldfields, the tiny new Colony of Victoria in 1855 imposed a tax on these arrivals as well as a limit to the numbers of Chinese passengers allowed to per ship.<sup>3</sup> The most obvious result of these taxes was a shift in disembarkation point from Port Philip (Melbourne) to at first Port Adelaide and then increasingly to Guichen Bay (Robe), just across the border in South Australia from where many thousands walked many hundreds of kilometres to arrive at the Victorian goldfields. Before South Australia enacted its own similar legislation some 15,000 Chinese gold seekers had arrived at Robe, most in 1857, and moved on. If the story was left here there would be little for a fastidious historian to complain about.

Unfortunately for the fastidious historian, and hopefully for the merely intelligent reader also, this story is invariably embellished with accounts of ill-treatment by unscrupulous ship captains amounting to virtually being thrown overboard in some cases. Overcharging, false guides, and a lack of preparation resulting in numerous deaths along the way (paralleled with such an

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<sup>1</sup> According to one account it “must be one of the epic events of Australian history”, Horsfall, David, *March to Big Gold Mountain*, Red Rooster Press, 1985, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Examples are: Ellen Mary Cawthorne, *The Long Journey: the Story of the Chinese Landings at Robe during the Gold Rush Era, 1852-63*, Hansen House, S.A., 1974; Golden Dragon Museum, *The Walk from Robe*, Golden Dragon Museum, 2001; Fiona Ritchie, *Guichen Bay to Canton Lead: the Chinese Trek to Gold*, District Council of Robe, 2004 and Liz Harfull, *Guichen Bay and the Chinese Landings*, District Council of Robe, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Tiny – its population of 77,000 in 1851 was still only 200,000 in 1854; new – self-government granted 1850 and a semi-democratic legislature in 1855.

excess of preparation that handsome limestone wells were apparently dug also), complete the tale. The too ready acceptance of this mix of variously sourced tales, myths and actual history are generally the result of a rather manifest lack of background and context. This is a lack common in Chinese Australian history whereby “the Chinese” appear and disappear with little or no regard for where they came from or why. They are seen as a perpetually exotic element condemned in the past, sympathised with or even heroised in the present, but are rarely seen as an intrinsic element of Australian history.

### **The bare story**

The gold rushes began in Australia in 1851 with thousands arriving, mainly from Europe, in the years immediately following. Chinese goldseekers however didn't begin arriving in numbers until early 1855, although they had already joined the rush to California in 1850. The shift to the Victorian goldfields was not a major one given that Hong Kong was the same port of embarkation to any of the “white settler nations” with California and Victoria (Australia) referred to thereafter as the “old” and “new” goldfields (金山) by those from much the same Pearl River Delta districts.<sup>4</sup> The Colony of Victoria had only gained a separate existence from the Colony of New South Wales in 1850 and with a tiny population and an inflated sense of destiny it's governing class immediately felt overwhelmed by the arrival of newcomers.<sup>5</sup> While its fear of people from China is well known, in fact the first efforts of Colony of Victoria at stemming the flow of “outsiders” was directed at people from Tasmanian (then called Vandemonians).<sup>6</sup> Denied this first attempt at population control by their British overlords, the next effort was directed at “The Chinese Question” and a two-pronged discriminatory tax was imposed that began to come into effect at the end of 1855.

The reaction to this legal change was just as swift as the spread of the news of gold itself as ships captains and agents, both European and Chinese, in Hong Kong and also the Pearl River

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<sup>4</sup> “Gold Mountain” is in fact a now ubiquitous translation for the Chinese characters 金山 (gum san/jin shan) but is in fact a translation choice over the more accurate if prosaic “goldfields”. This is a preference that sought to make exotic what for Europeans was considered normal – namely, rushing to goldfields. While an attractive term that is good for titles of novels and films it should be noted that it continues to play a role in that ‘othering’ of Chinese people that began in this period.

<sup>5</sup> As a contemporary poem put it: “From the gold-tinted sky to the ground, you / Can see that I'm worthy the Queen. / In her Majesty's Crown I'm a jewel, / No brighter one there do you see, / So take it (dear Sydney!) not cruel, / The royal name has been given to me.” *The Argus*, 29 October 1850, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> “[T]hey [Chinese] are not much better than ... Vandemonians”, *The Argus*, 15 July 1856, p.6. See, Janet McCalman, *Vandemonians: The Repressed History of Colonial Victoria* (Melbourne University Press, 2021).

Delta villages adjusted.<sup>7</sup> These new taxes affected both the agents and organisers who were extending the capital known as “credit-tickets” that enabled most Pearl River Delta villagers to travel at all, and also the ship owners and captains who carried them as passengers. The first group needed to calculate the £10 poll tax into the overall costs, while the second were responsible for a £10 tax on passengers over the tonnage limit.<sup>8</sup> The result of the combined efforts of these experienced profit seekers, which some had foreseen, was that by early 1856 many hundreds of Chinese gold seekers were traveling to Port Adelaide and taking the gold escort route that has been established a few years earlier by South Australians heading to and returning from the goldfields.

In fact, many alternative routes were taken in this early period including ferries up the Murray River as far as Maiden’s Punt (now Moama/Ehucla) and walking a mere 100kms to the goldfields, or transshipping (usually at Port Adelaide, but also at Sydney and even Launceston) to coastal “screw steamers” and heading for Guichen Bay in order to shorten the walk by some 200 kms.<sup>9</sup> The year 1856 therefore saw many thousands already evading the Victorians taxes when at the beginning of 1857 much larger ships began arriving directly from Hong Kong at Guichen Bay. This is when the numbers disembarking at the small port of Robe go from hundreds to thousands with, on at least one occasion, 3,000 people at one time. These high numbers embarking at Robe continued throughout 1857 until South Australia introduced its own similar taxes.

Again, the response was rapid and by 1858 most new Chinese arrivals were heading for the NSW goldfields where the gold rush was increasing in any case. The Colony of NSW then introduced its own restrictions in 1861 while the South Australian restrictions were repealed in 1862. This saw a relatively small number of arrivals in 1862 and 1863, again via Guichen Bay. Finally, in 1865 the Victorians repealed their arrival taxes, as did NSW in 1867. In the period from 1855 to 1863 therefore some 16,000 gold seekers from southern China are reputed to have entered Victoria via South Australia, most but by no means all via Robe on Guichen Bay.

**[More to come.]**

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<sup>7</sup> For discussion of the Pearl River Delta see below.

<sup>8</sup> An Act - To make provision for certain Immigrants, No.2, 1855.

<sup>9</sup> Some apparently walked from NSW probably via establish inland routes, though Twofold Bay, the nearest NSW port to the Victoria border, was mentioned by some as a possible alternative route but an overland walk to the Victorian goldfields was not established and there is no evidence of anyone actually taking this route.