

Commemoration of 110th Anniversary of the Birth of Rewi
Alley

Speech by New Zealand China Friendship Society

National President

Margaret Cooper

7 September 2007

Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen

Rewi Alley was a great man – a New Zealander who made a difference to many thousands of Chinese people. We are here today to reflect, remember and honour this man, acknowledge the work that he did in China during the sixty years that he lived with the people he loved, and celebrate the links that he established between our two countries.

Rewi left New Zealand in 1926 and arrived in Shanghai in 1927 with the true New Zealand pioneering spirit – and found his destiny in China. Life in New Zealand in the early 1900's was a time when hardship was a way of living, but families were rich with the basics of life. We were a young country at that time, new towns and cities were being developed and much of the land was being made arable. Our men and women were renowned for their ability to adapt to many situations and tasks on the land. One way often used to describe the capability of our forefathers “is in the use of the number 8 wire” – which means we were able to adapt one piece of wire to carry out many tasks, accomplish something out of very little, in a resourceful way.

It would have been this spirit that inspired this remarkable man from Springfield in Canterbury, New Zealand, to achieve so much during his lifetime and yet remain a humble person, completely dedicated to helping people, particularly those in need and often in desperate situations, for example, in floods and famines, and through poverty and general hardships.

In his lifetime, Rewi lived out many roles: son, soldier, farmer, traveler, fire and factory inspector, radio technician and operator, headmaster & teacher, poet, author, scholar, goodwill ambassador and humanitarian. His life and work have been recognized in a number of ways. In China he was conferred honorary citizenship of Gansu Province and of Beijing. In New Zealand, he was awarded a Queens Service Order by the New Zealand Government, and an honorary Doctorate of Literature from the University of Victoria in Wellington.

During his colourful lifetime, Rewi was always able to reach out to people. He had a gift of being able to communicate at all levels. If there was a need to build something, raise money, or develop a project he had great ability to make it happen. The Gung Ho movement is a good example of Rewi initiating a project that assisted so many people. As you know it continues today.

It is my pleasure to extend the sincere best wishes to all assembled here today from all the members of the New Zealand China Friendship Society. Rewi Alley was a founder of our society and he remains an inspiration to us all. Each member of our society is very aware of Rewi Alley and the great work that he undertook and it is our commitment to keep his legacy alive and support those institutions that he began so many years ago.

Our thirteen Branches throughout New Zealand have been involved in the past, raising money for tractors, equipment and providing resources for Shandan Bailie School. We annually recruit, and finance the airfares and expenses, for a New Zealander to teach English at Shandan Bailie School.

The New Zealand China Friendship Society has actively developed projects that continue the work of Rewi Alley. In 2006 we developed and successfully funded a project entitled “Development of Rural Cooperatives in Shandan County”, which has worked with Rewi’s key foundations of Gung Ho, Shandan Bailie School and Shandan Cooperative Federation. This project has assisted 8 villages in Shandan to establish producer cooperatives.

We are currently seeking funding by the New Zealand Government for a follow-on project to help to establish further cooperatives in rural Shandan. Through these kinds of projects New Zealand China Friendship Society is committed to promoting Rewi Alley's causes in 21st century China.

In New Zealand, Rewi Alley remains a towering figure in many aspects of New Zealand China Friendship Society objectives, from developing projects to facilitating friendship. Our website continues to promote and sell Rewi's books to members and the public. Money was also raised for the restoration of his museum at the Youxie compound here in Beijing. The Christchurch Branch has remained actively involved in the Rewi Alley School and the sister city relationship with Gansu.

Rewi Alley is still recognized as one of New Zealand's most famous people exports. Just last year, a sculpture of Rewi by Lu Bo was mounted in a park on the North Shore at Auckland. Many of our members were personal friends of Rewi, his family was special to him and so many are here today to celebrate his life.

In his latter years he saw change coming to China, but what would he have thought about the great modernization that has taken place here in China over the past twenty years since his passing? I am quite sure that he would have embraced it as just another challenge, working within the current Government direction to construct a New Socialist Countryside to extend assistance to those living outside the wealthy city areas.

China is now an economic power that has not yet reached its full potential. A rapidly increasing number of your people are becoming highly educated, and the future looks promising.

The Beijing Olympics Games will be the best ever held. The City of Beijing has already begun the countdown and the excitement of your people is something that game's officials have never seen before.

But we must reflect back on the good New Zealand – China relations that Rewi played a very significant part in fostering, and worked so sincerely to establish. He wanted our two countries to be friends, trade together, and for our two people to travel freely to each other's countries, and for our future generations to live in peace. In this, he would be very pleased with our current levels of genuine friendship.

It will be a proud moment when the 1st Free Trade Agreement between China and New Zealand is signed – an honour for our country and a milestone in the friendly relations with China.

Over the next few days we will continue to celebrate the life of Rewi Alley, and I would like to personally thank the Chinese People Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries for bringing us all together for this celebration.

In closing Rewi was a true friend to all who had a pleasure of knowing him, and a New Zealander that we can be extremely proud of and continue to be inspired by

Thank you