

110th Anniversary of the Birth of Rewi Alley
Shandan Bailie School, Gansu
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Three days ago a large group of people, from China and from New Zealand, gathered in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing to commemorate the 110th anniversary of the birth of Rewi Alley, a great son of China and a great son of New Zealand. I was privileged to be invited to speak on behalf of the government of New Zealand at that occasion, to record the contribution Rewi had made to bringing New Zealand and China closer together, and more importantly, the contribution he had made to improvement in the lives and the living conditions of thousands, of millions of people of China.

I am honoured that you should have invited me to come to Shandan today, to be with you in the place where Rewi, late in life, would say he had spent the most enjoyable time of the 60 years he lived in this country. In this place where such a productive relationship had been built between, on the one hand, people struggling to overcome the challenges of nature, war, poverty and inadequate education, and on the other, a New Zealander with a vision and a huge determination.

Rewi arrived here in Shandan in Gansu in 1944, from Shuangshipu where this school had been founded. He had had sixteen years experience in China. He had worked in Shanghai, in Wuhan and along the Yangtze River. He had shown his capacity for organisation, the humanitarian impulse that drove him. His work building up the Gung Ho movement to become part of the force that sustained China's opposition to the Japanese invasion of the country, had made Rewi a name heard widely in China, and far beyond. His flood and famine relief work

had saved countless lives, and if he had returned to New Zealand at that point a legend would have grown around the exploits of this remarkable man.

But in 1944 Rewi was far from finished. He was still only 46. His experience in areas behind the Japanese blockades had given him a vision of the power of a mobilised China. He had not had extensive capital to invest. He had had little in the way of machinery or technology. But by using the limited resources that were available, and by organising local communities to work together, he had built up the Gung Ho movement.

Rewi had seen that industrial development needed to be spread across China, it was not just something for the eastern coastal areas. He had an idea of what China's western and inland regions required. And to this he brought skills that he had learned first in New Zealand - a hugely practical sense that one must build what is appropriate to the place, that it must involve and benefit the community, that it must be practical, that effective vocational and youth training is crucial, that education must be an integral part of any project. And so Rewi brought to Gansu and to Shandan the lessons and experience he had gained in New Zealand, refined by what he had done in China. That vision remains strikingly relevant today given the need for China to develop the western regions and balance its national development

The Bailie school in Shandan became something of a beacon for those in New Zealand keen to support the work that Rewi was undertaking in China. And let me pay tribute here today to Rewi's family in New Zealand who were at the centre of that support. How appropriate it is that the family should be so well represented at these commemorations, and should be here to see the legacy that Rewi left. Many young, and some not so young New Zealanders came to China, inspired by the stories reaching home of Rewi's achievements. Today we extend a particular welcome to Nyarene Masson who returns to Shandan so many years after working here with Rewi.

In 1945 Rewi took over the headmastership of this school after the death of George Hogg. As the Gung Ho movement lost some of its energy with the defeat of Japan and dislocation caused by fighting between the KMT and Communist forces, Rewi set out to build Shandan as the foremost expression of what the Gung Ho initiative could achieve. People from all over China, and from around the world, especially from New Zealand, came to teach here. What we see today is the legacy of what they started. But long before Rewi was ready to leave Shandan changes in the school's governance meant he had to move to Beijing. Although his time here was relatively short – only eight years - this place never left his soul.

I am pleased that the connection between New Zealand and the Bailie School in Shandan should have continued, that funds from New Zealand, including support from the New Zealand government, has continued to support work here in the school and in the community.

Rewi loved this place: its barrenness but its beauty; Shandan welcomed him and he took pleasure in putting something back into it. Physically, Shandan for him brought back memories of Central Otago in New Zealand's South Island. In later life he took pleasure and inspiration from his trips back here. I recall him talking to me in the mid 1970s about how he needed to get back here. It is right that this is where he chose to have his ashes scattered; that he wanted the treasures he had collected to be preserved here. It is right that his memory, which Shandan has done so much to keep alive and to honour, should be honoured here today by friends from China and New Zealand alike.

I thank you for the invitation to be part of this commemoration with you today.