

Rewi Alley's Profound Sentiments for China in His Late Years In Memory of the 110th Anniversary of Rewi Alley's Birth

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Twenty years have flashed by since Ai Lao (as we affectionately addressed the revered old Rewi Alley) passed away. What an unusual and amazing period of time from 1987 to 2007! In China and the world as well as in our global village, the changes have been too fast, too dramatic, and even incredible! Sometimes I wonder, if Ai Lao were alive today, what would he be thinking?

During his 60 years in China since 1927, he was both a witness and a participant in our revolution and reconstruction, sharing weal and woe with our people. His China experiences were legendary and unique to ordinary folk in other countries. His outstanding contributions have won him the profound love and esteem of all Chinese. With the passage of time, old stories may fade, but fond memories of this great New Zealander's friends and acquaintances may emit sparks that rejuvenate their lives.

On the eve of commemorating the 110th anniversary of Rewi Alley's birth and 20th anniversary of his passing, I searched out my work diaries of 20 years ago and was surprised to find that during the Beidaiho and Hainan holidays between 1982 and 1985, when Ai Lao was invited to relate an oral history for his autobiography, he frequently "slipped away" from his own stories to current China affairs. As my chief attention was focused on stories of his past, I never really appreciated the significance of those hard-thinking remarks. Ai Lao did not care much for his autobiography and would rather use the time to write more about China. The digressions were actually an unconscious revelation of his profound sentiments for the land of his adoption.

At that time, Rewi Alley was mainly concerned with ecological issues, natural disasters, youth education and social security in China. He regarded these issues as deserving top priority for all Chinese on the way to a sustainable development, and he could not sit and watch without giving advice.

Since the early 1980s, Ai Lao's health was failing as a result of repeated heart attacks and skin cancer operations. Nevertheless, he insisted on continuing with his annual tours to different places, particularly to where he had worked before, to the construction sites of big hydro projects or areas recently hit by floods or earthquakes. The policies of reform and opening-up, of setting things to rights and shifting the focus of work to economic construction gave him much inspiration and rekindled his enthusiasm to do

more in China. But the after-effects of the Cultural Revolution and the new problems arising from opening to the West also began to worry him with the fear that various evils might emerge to cause detours in China's future development. Each time he came back from the interior, he would write to the relevant authorities, giving his personal views or criticisms.

He reported that the destruction of forests in Hainan was getting worse as people even cut hard wood for firewood, and that tree felling was still going on near the Songtao Reservoir in the Wuzhishan Mountain area so that a disaster could strike the peasants should torrential rain cause a flood that damaged the dyke and the narrow spillway. When he visited the Hongshuihe hydro- power station in Guangxi Province, he found that silt was causing increasing danger to the generators. He was told that new materials had been used to prevent abrasion of the blades, so there should be no problem, but he felt this was only a partial solution, because all rivers had their own history. Everything had its own law, and people should handle things according to their own law. He also warned the local government on the danger of pests in large areas of pine forest in Guangxi and suggested birds be imported immediately to save the trees from pine caterpillars, as the spread of pests would result in more soil erosion, bringing tremendous economic losses.

In the last year of Rewi Alley's life, his poor health no longer allowed him to travel except to Beidaiho beach for the summer vacation. While he was there, he learned that discussions were underway on proposals for the Three Gorges Dam Project on the Yangtze River. He hurried to complete a report soon after his return to Beijing, stressing that governing a big river like the Yangtze is not easy or simple and that any disaster might cause a catastrophic flood, destroying the Gezhouba Dam and possibly changing the river course to the sea via the Dongting and Boyang Lakes, flooding all the cities and factories on the way. He added that imbalanced ecological conditions had existed for years in the Sichuan region, where excessive logging in the upper reaches of the Yangtze were causing erosion from bad to worse.

Rewi Alley was not an expert on water conservancy; his views came only from personal experience, but his anxiety revealed his true love and far-sightedness for China. In the event, his knowledge and deliberations on China's natural and social environmental problems as a sincere "learner and doer" in China over six decades are a valuable part of the legacy he left to the Chinese people.

Another concern of Rewi Alley's was the education of youth and the change of social values towards seeking personal fame and wealth since the 1980s. In Hainan he

once saw several boys together whipping a young tree like mad, apparently imitating what they saw from films of gang violence. He feared that the youth, once thus misled, might grow up to be a great threat to the whole of society. He did not like young people swarming to go abroad with the sole aim of acquiring a gilded title, taking academic degrees as the supreme purpose of study. He was also reluctant to accept the fact that some old revolutionary cadres, let alone their children, sought individual fortune. In 1982, when he was asked to speak at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Shandan Bailie School, he made the following remarks: "To be a youth in today's China is vastly superior to being one anywhere else in the world. Nowhere is there so great a challenge, nowhere is work on so great a scale, nowhere does the creativeness of the individual, the strength of the group matter so much.

"The very fact that China has suffered from millennia of deforestation and erosion, with rivers silting up, posing a constant threat to millions, has made for man-sized problems that call for big men to solve them. How then does one become a big man? Not by any political trickery, nor by trying to make friends in high places, but by ever struggling to gain the objective view, training oneself, gathering knowledge and experience, learning how to work in cooperation with others, retaining the humility of Zhou Enlai in the face of immense tasks that have to be done.

"A big man is not proud or arrogant. He is simple and thoughtful, building on one reality after another, so that the basis for his thinking is solid, and he develops character and directness.... It does not matter whether you are called to high position or just keep on with an ordinary one; to be really big will benefit not only yourself but also those with whom you come in contact."

These words carried such great weight, reminding the young people not to be self-satisfied by forever seeking a comfortable material life while forgetting to raise consistently their spiritual ethos.

The greatest satisfaction to Rewi Alley in his late years was the revival of Gung Ho (Chinese Industrial Co-operatives) and the Shandan Bailie School (SBS). He had waited for the fruition of this dream for over 30 years since they stopped functioning in 1951. Even then, he believed the two causes that had contributed to the victory of the War of Resistance and served the poor in wartime could continue to play a positive role in China's reconstruction. To his disappointment, the school was moved to Lanzhou and became a technical oil school under the Ministry of Oil, while the Association of Chinese Industrial

Cooperatives (ACIC) --the leading organ of Gung Ho, was incorporated into the All-China Federation of Cooperatives and the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives (ICCIC, or, the Gung Ho International Committee, the overseas support organization of Gung Ho) ceased to operate. From then on, Gung Ho and SBS disappeared from public sight. However, Rewi Alley and his old colleagues still believed that, in socialist China, the Gung Ho movement, which advocates the values of fairness, justice and democracy among people, and the SBS for training practical young technicians through integrating study with production, could continue to benefit the Chinese people and serve China's modernization in the new era. After the implementation of the policy of reform and opening to the outside world, with the support of the Central Government and the Gansu Provincial Government as well as Gung Ho enthusiasts at home and abroad, ACIC was successfully reorganized in 1983, and ICCIC and a new SBS resumed activities in 1987.

Rewi Alley's achievements through selfless dedication and painstaking work won him a worthy reputation in his later years. He was well known as a writer, poet, social activist, historian, archaeologist, educator, father of Gung Ho and bridge-builder of China-New Zealand friendship. He was awarded the Queen's Service Order for community service and conferred the titles of Honorary Citizen of Beijing and Gansu Province as well as an honorary doctorate from Victoria University in New Zealand.

On December 2, 1977, Deng Xiaoping, who reappeared in public life as vice premier for the first time after the so-called "Cultural Revolution", addressed him as "our veteran old fighter, old friend, and old comrade-in-arms" at a banquet celebrating his 80th birthday. Deng said, "Thousands upon thousands of foreign friends have helped the cause of the Chinese revolution. It is no easy thing to have done so much for the Chinese people as Comrade Rewi Alley has done constantly for half a century, in the years when we faced difficulties and adversity, in the years when we fought for the triumph for our revolution and in the years since victory was won in our revolution. It is only natural that he enjoys the respect of the Chinese people." These words exemplify the high esteem the Chinese government and people have for Rewi Alley's whole life in this country.

Rewi Alley enjoyed a happy and fruitful life as an old friendship envoy of the New Zealand people. As a long-resident guest living in the Youxie compound, his daily life and work were well looked after by specially assigned Youxie staff. His moral integrity, down-to-earth working style and simple living deeply appealed to all those working beside him. Beginning in the 1980s, to fulfil his grand wish, Youxie facilitated the shipping of his

collection of nearly 4,000 Chinese cultural relics to Shandan as a souvenir for his second home. The growing interest in Rewi Alley's life stories led to the decision by Youxie's late President Wang Bingnan to set up a Rewi Alley Research Office, which helped arrange his archives and materials for his autobiography and handle the requests of his Chinese and foreign visitors. His rich collection of books was finally sent to the library of the People's University in Beijing for public use. After all this was accomplished and a grand celebration of his 90th birthday held, he suddenly passed away on December 27th, 1987.

Many people have tried to guess why Rewi Alley never married. In fact, it was his deliberate choice to remain single. Several female friends of different nationalities admired and adored him for his virtue and talents, yet to him, having like minds did not mean taking the same way of life. They eventually remained to be his devoted friends for the rest of his life. He did think once of getting married to a girl of his heart, but the thoughts that in revolution one should not give hostages, that marrying and settling down with a family and children would retard his political progress and so on, time and again made him hesitate. In addition, he felt having a family without being able to spend all his time with them would give him a guilty conscience.

However, it did not mean Rewi Alley had no family life all those years. He adopted two orphans, Alan and Michael, during his relief work in the Inner Mongolia drought in 1929 and the Honghu flood in 1931. He brought them up in Shanghai till they finished their middle school education, then sent them to Yan'an to join the revolution. While in Shandan, he took over the responsibility of looking after the four Nie brothers whom George Hogg adopted in Baoji after their father fled to Yan'an and their mother died of illness. He also fostered Deng Bangzhen, nephew of the famous revolutionary Martyr Deng Zhongxia, till he completed his schooling in the Central Academy of Fine Arts and later created conditions for him to get married and start his career. These boys and their wives and children made up Rewi Alley's "big Chinese family", giving him tremendous warmth and joy as he advanced in age. Moreover, the hundreds of alumni of the old Shandan Bailie School would bring him glad tidings of their successes in different fields of work, a big comfort to their beloved headmaster.

In his poem 'Home' written October 25, 1977, Rewi Alley described his life in Beijing:

I look at the old Ishing teapot,

the blue cup and saucer, the
plates from Jingdezhen each
morning, and smile, home is a place
where bits and pieces one has loved,
collect; where friends and family
come around, making walls echo
with sounds of laughter; where flowers
grow, and where too, determination
is wedded to daily living, where folk
from Oceania, the Americas, and too
some from Europe, come for talk;
the place that is the base for travels
into the hinterland; ever a comforting
thought that it is there in its
quiet compound of trees that leap
into life each spring, and fill
each autumn with golden radiance,

A kindly home is this
that China has given me,
How can I thank her more?

For Rewi Alley, the basic tenet of his philosophy was "to give " and not "to take", hence he remained calm, never overjoyed or frightened in favorable or adverse circumstances. His dedication to promoting the wellbeing of the Chinese people was voluntary and unreserved, never expecting any reward. He felt content from giving, kept pursuing his goal even if he was misunderstood, and continued to invigorate himself by overcoming all difficulties. In answering the question put by some youths: "Why did you stay in China?" Rewi Alley said, "China gave me an aim to life, a cause to fight for, each year more richly; a place in the ranks of the advancing millions; how great a thing has this been, what bigger reward could one imagine than that which has come to me, and now sustains!"

Perhaps today some people may think Rewi Alley was an "idealist" of his times. In fact, he was a most practical and down-to-earth man of action. His life-long ambition was

to do something beneficial and substantial for the ordinary Chinese people. To this end, he made a great deal of personal sacrifices, withstood all kinds of political pressure and risked his life while working for Gung Ho despite the turmoils of war and attacks by infectious diseases, till the dawn of a New China. Today, when we reminisce about his noble sentiments, his magnanimous internationalist spirit, his wisdom and his foresight, we feel as if some fresh air were purifying our soul and encouraging us to improve ourselves in pursuit of the higher values of human life.

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