

New Zealand China Friendship Society

60<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference

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John McKinnon 麦康年

(New Zealand Ambassador to China 2001-2004)

Vice-Chairman Liao Hui

Ambassador Xu Jianguo

Hon Philip Burdon, Patron of the Society

National President Eric Livingstone

Organiser of this conference George Andrews

Greetings

首先，我趁这次机会对新中友好协会成立60周年表示热烈的祝贺，这标志了新西兰人民与中国人民牢固的友谊与相互的信任，同时这也是一个崭新的开始，是对充满希望的未来的展望与期待。

另外，我对廖晖副主席一行来新西兰参加新中友好协会60周年的纪念活动表示衷心的感谢。

First, let me congratulate the New Zealand China Friendship Society on its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This occasion symbolises the deep ties of friendship and mutual trust that exist between the peoples of New Zealand and China. At the same time this also marks a new beginning and a future full of hope and expectation.

Could I also thank Vice-Chairman Liao Hui and his delegation for coming especially to New Zealand to participate in these anniversary activities. And may I also thank you most warmly for the very generous gift to the Society that you have just announced.

Philip Burdon and Vice-Chairman Liao Hui have already provided excellent accounts of the Society and of the current stage and future prospects of New Zealand China relations. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share with you some personal recollections of China over nearly 35 years and thoughts about the work of Friendship Societies over the past 60 years.

My first acquaintance with the world of Friendship Societies came in the late 1970s, during my first assignment in Beijing. It was well known to all New Zealand diplomats that by far the most famous New Zealander ever to live in China was Rewi Alley. In fact so famous was he, and so far apart the circles in which we moved, that it was not the case, as some seemed to think, that Rewi was daily present in our working lives. But he was present in Beijing, and most New Zealanders of any distinction who visited China at that time made the pilgrimage to Rewi's home to learn from him dimensions of China experience that they could not gain from any other New Zealander. That home of his in the old Italian legation on 台基厂大街 Taijichang Da Jie, was a wonderful mixture of China and New Zealand, of Rewi's many intermingled lives. To meet him was to connect with what then seemed the distant time before Liberation while looking ahead to the newest China that began to be born in December 1978.

Rewi lived in close proximity to the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries – 中国人民对外友好协会 – 'You Xie' for short. That organisation, and its fellow societies in many countries, was established at a time when China did not have diplomatic relations with many countries of the world. Where politicians could not go, friends sometimes could, and in this way You Xie and its outreach contributed to building understanding of the then new China, as Rewi Alley did through the many books he wrote in that last phase of his life.

And this was a task which needed to be undertaken in the 1950s. Even without the diplomatic impasse of Taiwan, understanding the new China would have been difficult for people in New Zealand. The expulsion of foreign missionaries and foreign businesses, the Korean War, the establishment of the iron curtain in Europe, all wrapped up in the ideology of Communism, presented an almost insurmountable challenge to informed debate on what was happening in China and its implications for this country. Those who knew

China most intimately – the missionaries and businesspeople who had been expelled, the old established Chinese community with its roots in Guangdong, were amongst the least likely to feel well disposed to this latest upheaval in that ancient land. And those such as Alley who did speak out on behalf of the new China were quickly labelled as fellow travellers. As Alley himself said, when he was contemplating returning to New Zealand after liberation, who wants a thoroughly Red schoolmaster anyway?

These were the very specific circumstances in which the New Zealand You Xie was born. It is enormously to the credit of its founders that they persisted with their commitment to building understanding of China in New Zealand, entirely against the odds. So much so indeed that I suspect many of them took a perverse delight in being apart from the mainstream. And to the extent that there was a current of editorial and educated opinion critical of New Zealand keeping its distance from China, it was in spite of the features of the new China, in particular its communism, not because of it.

There were of course links, and you have seen one example of them in the film that was screened last night, from Rudall Hayward's visit to China in 1957. That film having been uncovered after some effort, on a number of occasions I showed it to visitors to the embassy in Beijing during my second assignment there. They were fascinated, as were New Zealand viewers, by the glimpses of the steady development of China before the onslaught of the Cultural Revolution. Tied up with that film is the story of the Maori feather cloak which was presented to Chairman Mao by the Hayward delegation. It took another year or so of detective work to track it down. We found it stored with other foreign gifts to China's leaders in the Museum on Tiananmen Square. The Museum's curators were doubtful they had found it: yes, they did have a cloak which matched our description, but it came from Sri Lanka. This seemed rather odd, but they were polite enough to accede to our request to look at the cloak, even if it did come from Sri Lanka. We did, and knew immediately it was 'our' cloak, so to speak. The explanation was simple. Sri Lanka used to be known as Ceylon, 锡兰 'Xilan' in Chinese, and so very similar to 新西兰 'Xinxilan', New Zealand in Chinese. So the cloak had been mis placed, but not lost. This identification was made when Tumu Te Heuheu of Ngati Tuwharetoa was visiting China in connection with his duties on the UNESCO world heritage committee, and he and his delegation were able to recite a karakia over the cloak.

With the establishment of diplomatic relations between New Zealand and China in December 1972, 40 years ago this year, the role of the Friendship Society changed almost overnight, to swimming with instead of against the tide. It was now playing into a society which was avid for knowledge and experience of China. I still often meet people who visited China in those heady days of the early 1970s. I don't think they recall their experience to me just because they know of my China connections. Rather it was that the impact of exposure to this once closed, now open society, was both exciting and unforgettable. And this was true whether they went as students, as teachers, as foreign experts, in business, or simply as tourists. For me that China, the China which was just emerging from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, is now as unimaginably far away as was pre-Liberation China at that time. And indeed the late 1970s is equidistant in time from Liberation and from the present day.

It is a great pleasure for me to see here today some of my friends from that time and others whose links with China go back even further - Bill Willmott and Diana, Jan McLeod and many others.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and New Zealand came a few years before an even more significant event – China's commitment to reform and opening up, beginning in December 1978. I remember this very vividly, as I had not long taken up my first assignment in the New Zealand Embassy in Beijing. I still recall the report that I wrote on the famous Third Plenum, assessing as best I could its significance for China and for our relations with that country.

Since then I would suggest that our perceptions of China have gone through several phases, largely as a result of events and developments in China itself. June 1989 was a punctuation mark which could not be ignored, but it did not in fact lead backwards as some feared at the time. Yet it did make the Society's task of interpreting the complexities of China more challenging, and that challenge remains: one of my predecessors, Tony Small, observed some time ago that it was a mistake to think that China was destined to converge 'asymptotically' with the West.

But the larger development was of the increasing political and economic impact of China, both on our own country, on the Asia-Pacific region and on the world at large. This was expected, indeed commentators for centuries had been speculating on what the (re) emergence of China would mean, whenever it did finally

occur. I am absolutely confident, because I was there at the time, that in 1979, nobody, whether in China or outside, expected the rapidity with which change has occurred, with all the challenges that presents. A decade or so later some did. Another of my predecessors as ambassador, Lindsay Watt, wrote in 1992, that China's economic output could surpass that of the United States in under 15 years ie by 2007; and that by 2000 China could become New Zealand's largest market. Well, neither of those predictions has come to pass, but they may well both do so within a decade or two.

In the course of my four years as ambassador in China I had many contacts with the Friendship Society, including attendance at its own 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2004 in Beijing. But two of the most memorable encounters in that year took me to more distant places than the Great Hall of the People: Honghu in Hubei and Shandan in Gansu. Both of course were intimately connected with Rewi Alley, and that was the reason for my visits. Honghu was where Rewi assisted with flood relief and wheat deliveries in the 1930s, while Shandan of course is the site of the Baillie school where Rewi lived and taught for many years. I am very happy to see here today Margaret Cooper, who was with me on several of these special occasions, and Liu Guozhong, from Shandan. Many years later these communities cherish the links with New Zealand that have come about as a result of Rewi's involvement in their lives. It is fitting and moving that these have continued to today. They are a reminder of the many facets of New Zealand's links with China.

I was less successful in getting to Songjiazhuang, in Quyang county and Baoding district, the scene of Kathleen Hall's labours. Every effort I made to get there was thwarted and I had to content myself with several meetings of representatives of these communities in Beijing. It is pleasing to see that recognition of Kathleen Hall's work has increased apace, thanks in large part to the efforts of Tom Newnham.

In the future that is unfolding, the activities of this Society will become both more important and harder. The latter because there will be so many more actors involved with China, across the whole spectrum of New Zealand life; the former because it has never been more essential to have a good understanding of China and to communicate that within New Zealand.

And what of that future? Two of my three children speak Chinese and one of them lives and works in Beijing. They are amongst increasing numbers of young New Zealanders who are taking themselves to Asia in addition to Australia, North America and Europe. That bodes well for us, as does the presence of many talented young Chinese in New Zealand.

友谊和发展是继续的，我们都是向前看的。昨天的我和明天的我让我深深地感受到和中国的缘分。和中国朋友交谈是我的快乐和享受。

展望未来，中国和新西兰在世界经济发展中，将会协手共进，至助互利，就像朋友加兄弟。

As we go forward friendship and development continue. My experiences in the past and in the future let me understand China's prospects. Being able to talk to Chinese friends is a real source of enjoyment and insight. As we look to the future, I have no doubt that New Zealand and China will be partners.

Since the days of Marco Polo the West has never been neutral about China. Voltaire and his philosopher colleagues used China as a stick to criticise the political and social order of Europe. The arrival of Chinese labourers in the countries of the Pacific rim was met with prejudice and exploitation. After 1949, competing visions of China animated political debate and worse. Much of this passed China by. But this is no longer the case. Now, how we think, talk and act about China is itself a constituent of that relationship. And as in any relationship, honesty, integrity and courtesy are at a premium, even if we agree, and even more if we disagree.

This Society has stood by China through good times and bad for 60 solid years. As today's conference demonstrates, you have accomplished much. But your task is not finished. Indeed, maybe it is only just beginning.

Thank you.