

Report: Following the Footsteps of Rewi Alley

Introduction

In December 2013 I was fortunate enough to travel to Beijing, JiangXi Province, Chengdu, Lanzhou, and Shanghai on the Following the Footsteps of Rewi Alley tour as a representative of the New Zealand China Friendship Society. In this report I set out my impressions of China, including some reflections on Rewi Alley's legacy, and what my thoughts are on the future of the tour and the Society's involvement with it.

My impressions of China

As a young New Zealander, I was very proud to be able to discuss Rewi Alley's contribution to China with so many Chinese people across all the places we visited. It is amazing to reflect on what Rewi Alley would have experienced during his 60 years in China. He travelled widely throughout China – his knowledge and network of connections across the country was unique among foreigners living in China at that time. The period in which Rewi Alley lived in China was also a period of great change. I myself was struck by the rapid development evident in every place we visited, the contrast between ancient sites steeped in history which have left a lasting impression on so many Chinese people and visitors like myself, sitting alongside vast modern constructions of motorways and railways, with weaving flyovers and bridges, being constructed at an amazing speed and on a huge scale.

In my view one of the fantastic aspects of the New Zealand China relationship is the different qualities each country has. The places we visited in China were bustling with activity, utterly vibrant, and burgeoning with people. China's ancient history, evident in the Great Wall in Beijing, the Tengwang Pavilion in Nanchang, and the national treasures we were privileged to see in the Lanzhou City Museum and Shanghai Museum, is incredible. China is facing particular challenges at present on a greater scale than New Zealand which government officials openly discussed with us: air pollution and urbanisation (we particularly discussed the increasing movement of young people to big cities) were particularly emphasised. The regional diversity and variation in lifestyles of the people in each area is incredible. New Zealand on the other hand is much smaller, with wide open spaces, surrounded by sea.

There is much less variation in lifestyle and certainly far fewer people. When two nations have so many differences, there is much to be learned and gained from one other in connecting on a cultural level.

At the same time, New Zealand and China also have some wonderful similarities. A love of cuisine, connections between our indigenous peoples, an entrepreneurial spirit, an emphasis on agriculture, a strong diplomatic friendship and close economic ties – all of which closely bind our two countries together. One of the most significant connections we have is a long history of friendship, exemplified in Rewi Alley – a person who is shared between New Zealand and China. The work done by the New Zealand China Friendship Society over many years in the spirit of Rewi Alley was also evident across China – but in particular in Lanzhou, a place which had special meaning for Rewi Alley. It was wonderful to see his legacy in tangible ways: to see his passion for education borne out in the Beijing Bailie University and the tools gifted by Rewi Alley still being used by students at Lanzhou City University (formerly the Bailie Oil School), but also in intangible ways – through the warm words spoken about his contribution to China during a tumultuous period, his enthusiasm for Chinese culture, his abiding respect for education and the close friendships he forged with so many Chinese people during the 60 years of his life he spent in China.

Going forward

I am so grateful to have been given this opportunity to learn and see so much of China. It was personally very special for me to learn more about my heritage being a half Chinese New Zealander. I want to thank the New Zealand Chinese Youth Federation who took the lead on organising this tour and did an incredible job, as well as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, the All China Youth Federation, and in particular the New Zealand China Friendship Society for sponsoring my place on the tour.

This was the first tour to my knowledge that combined a diverse range of organisations in travelling to China (the New Zealand China Friendship Society, the New Zealand Chinese Youth Federation, the Asia NZ Foundation, the NZ-China Council and the Minister of Maori Affairs). With that in mind in my view going forward some consideration ought to be given to how the aims, values, and goals of each organisation can best be highlighted within China as part of the tour. Many of these values will overlap within the wider goal of promoting and

strengthening the New Zealand-China relationship, but some work will need to be done in ensuring each organisation is recognised in its own right (as opposed to falling under the umbrella of one lead organisation where the trip is cross-disciplinary). I am excited by the prospect of turning this tour into an exchange with an opportunity for young Chinese to travel to New Zealand – further promoting friendship, understanding and goodwill between our two countries through the exchange of ideas and information. That could be something to work towards in the future.

Rewi Alley is a source of great inspiration for all young New Zealanders, his practical humanitarianism is something to be treasured and celebrated. I am confident that all members of the delegation have returned to New Zealand enthusiastic about performing a role within both the Chinese community and the wider community to deepen New Zealanders understanding of the importance of New Zealand's relationship with China. With that in mind I think it is important that all members of the tour report back and share their personal experiences with their organisation. Sharing our experiences with others with a keen interest in China is one small way in which we can continue Rewi Alley's legacy of promoting understanding and fostering knowledge within New Zealand about China.

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