

# Follow the Footsteps of Rewi Alley Tour 2013



## **Introduction**

This report covers my personal experiences and observations from ‘Follow the Footsteps of Rewi Alley Tour 2013’ as an individual and representative of the New Zealand China Friendship Society. I have thematically summarised my observations and thoughts into my Impressions of China and what Rewi Alley’s legacy means for me. I conclude with a summary of my thoughts on how the tour and NZCFS can maximise value from future trips.

The thoughts and expressions contained below are my own and in no way should they be attributed to me as a serving member of the New Zealand Defence Force.

## **Impressions of China**

There are four key impressions of China that I am left with following the tour, being, in no particular order: size, infrastructure, air pollution, and relationships.

*Size.* China is physically large; our tour traveled more than 6000km within mainland China from 22 November to 03 December. While this is not a new impression, it is worthy to continual re-emphasis to ensure that when talking about ‘China’ we are not talking about ‘one China’; rather, many large (geographically and population) and distinct provinces.

Given the sheer size of China it is not surprising to find ethnic and cultural diversity, which is reflected in the local cuisine, language, and attitudes to issues. However, despite some provincial preferences for greater autonomy, such as in Shanghai, it is clear there is a shared pride around China’s history and collective modern day achievements.

Any discussion and/or analysis of China should be cognisant that China is far from being a homogenous entity.

*Infrastructure.* Despite the long distances involved in the tour, the domestic airports and inland roads were modern, allowing for ease of travel. The investment in infrastructure is clear and obviously provides many economic and social benefits in facilitating the movement of people and goods within the country.

*Air Pollution.* The air pollution in Beijing and Shanghai is noticeably worse since my last visit to China in 2011. Additionally, the air pollution in Lanzhou is considerable worse than in either of China's major two cities. Without central government intervention to drastically reduce the levels of pollution, principally through controls on the promotion of high pollution industries, it would seem inevitable that even at current levels there will likely be considerable negative health and ultimately economic impacts upon the affected cities. The comment by Lanzhou's provincial government that current air pollution meets national standards is indicative that the central government does have an ability to reduce or incentivise provinces to reduce current air pollution.

*Relationships.* Having a strong, mutually beneficial, and either long lasting or high level relationship is important in cultural exchanges, business, or in achieving aims. Without some level of personal relationship underpinned by trust then progressing individual and organisational goals within such a vast and complex bureaucracy is likely to meet failure. While a strong presence and understanding of the central government in Beijing is necessary and important, relationships at the provincial and local level is of an equal or greater importance given the degree of autonomy these leaders exercise.

## **Rewi Alley's Legacy**

The legacy of Rewi Alley, while fading, is clearly still present within sectors of China, particularly that of his devotion, self sacrifice and ability to bridge two cultures. While Rewi Alley lived and worked during a period of history that is hard to comprehend or compare to today his spirit and energy for education, even in the face of difficult political circumstances remains admirable. I believe his primary legacy is the ability to succeed despite adversity, through rapid changes, and the value and necessity in being able to intimately understand another culture if you wish to truly survive and thrive.

Consequently, Rewi Alley's legacy through my eyes will most visibly and practically live on through my continued study and analysis of China's modern history, contemporary political environment, international relations and Mandarin. Through this I will be able to build upon my knowledge and understanding of China and how the world's most populous nation will likely affect New Zealand's political, economic and cultural structures.

Probably the most important challenge is keeping the Rewi Alley spirit relevant to a new generation of New Zealanders that have little connection or comprehension of his achievements. Relying on his historical legacy alone is unlikely to be sufficient to breathe new life and garner fresh support. Providing and supporting practical connections, educational and development exchanges would seem to offer the most promise in recruiting and retaining new members. A goal that is more likely to succeed with co-ordination and support from like minded organisations.

## **The Future**

The NZ Chinese Youth Federation did an outstanding job in organising and administering this tour from conception to completion. In order to build upon the success of this first tour, there is now an important opportunity for reflection on the goals and objectives of this tour in preparation for any future trips.

With such a diverse group of organizations being represented (NZCFS, Asia NZ Foundation, NZ-China Council, Minister of Maori Affairs, and the NZ Chinese Youth Federation) I believe there needs to be a review of:

- the benefits to each organisation from a combined trip;
- whether there is scope for greater alignment of the NZCFS, Asia NZ Foundation, and the NZ-China Council's goals and membership;
- a reconciliation of the role, aims, goals and membership requirements of the NZ Chinese Youth Federation against the other organisations;
- if the administration burden and leadership of the tour should rotate amongst the organisations;
- a framework/map of where each organisation sits in the greater NZ-China relationship; and
- how each organisation relates to the NZ Government's China Inc. Strategy 2012.

On a personal note I would hope that myself and the other tour members are able to share the experience and relevant stories back to our various organisations; experiences that are particularly unique given the wide access to provincial and academic leaders at our peer level. Stories that provide a first hand understanding and knowledge of how current Chinese leaders view local issues, ranging from: generational renewal, air pollution, tertiary education, economic growth, and agricultural reform. Such knowledge is important in being able

to provide an accurate and balanced picture of how New Zealand's largest trading partner and largest state within Asia-Pacific thinks and acts. This in turn will help to better inform the organisations we work within.

In the medium to long term, I would like to remain engaged in the assisting the next Follow in the Footsteps of Rewi Alley Tour. Particularly, from my own perspectives of this tour, and as a member of the New Zealand China Friendship Society. The tour is unique in its diverse composition of delegates, representing the breadth of NZ and various student and professional organisations. While this presents some unique challenges and raises important questions for future tours we should not lose focus of the overall goal of fostering the long standing and strong relationships that the NZCFS began in 1952.

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