

# Stacey Reire's report on the 'Rewi Alley Youth Tour, July 2017'

Overall, I loved it! My goal when going to China was to make new friends and learn more of the Chinese culture and to understand Rewi's devotion to its people. On this trip I did exactly that and more.

From day 1 to 10 on this trip I made many friends, all with completely different personalities and range of views on life. From day 1 to 10, I learned truckloads of information on everything that Rewi Alley and George Hogg had done in China, from where they lived, where they worked, to how they influenced China and the friends they made.

I felt this trip went so well. From the very beginning it was well organized. It was jam-packed with nearly everything we could possibly see in China. Some days' activities went from 7:30 am to 10:30 pm and getting through this was huge as I'd only recently got over a illness that left me with viral fatigue which meant staying in bed let alone going to school. So doing this without getting sick amazed me.

Our Chinese friends who led the trip were so hospitable and kind and quickly became our Chinese family. I think we all felt at home and completely safe at all times throughout the trip. It was so sad to say goodbye to everyone, and I will genuinely miss them all.

I wish we could do the same in New Zealand - to bring our Chinese family to our home and let them stay in New Zealand to share our culture with them. I can't believe it's over. I wish I could go back. One day I definitely will, I love China.

I love the food. It is so different from New Zealand food. I love the culture - so rich and unlike anything in my normal environment. I love the people, so beautiful and kind. I can't wait to be a part of that society again and to see my Chinese family soon.

## **17.07.17 - Day one in China - Shanghai.**

Day 1 in China was full of surprises. The New Zealand group and I stepped off the plane to be bombarded by the sauna-like heat of Shanghai. It was completely foreign to me. The heat, the flat lands, the people, but yet I was the foreigner and it was hard to accept that.

Today I had set myself the goal of trying hard to get to know my Chinese peers and their culture. At first the language barrier made it really hard but I found just smiling helped a lot. They now feel more comfortable and I feel less intrusive.

The day was a huge rush with time being a big factor in that. But it didn't stop me from taking in the beauty of China, I just couldn't stop taking photos and the lack of sleep from the flight was forgotten.

The Chinese students gifted us T-shirts and, oh my goodness, it stuck to my sweat like a paua [*an abalone*] to a rock. Not the most flattering look but it made it very easy to find one another in a large crowd of people which was rather convenient considering how many people are in Shanghai.

We started our tour of Shanghai and followed in the footsteps of Rewi Alley. First we visited the building where the communists wrote their magazine [*the revolutionary publication 'Bolshevik', in 1927*]. Then we visited Rewi Alley's house in Shanghai in one of the richest neighbourhoods where a lot of famous people lived. Rewi lived there with his 2 adopted sons Alan and Mike. Originally the house was said to be very large. But it had been changed by the owners who followed. They had built small rooms in this once beautiful lively house making it look rundown.

Next we went to the community centre where we were gifted fans and ice cream. IT WAS HEAVENLY! I really needed that after the hot weather. We were thanked so many times I felt like royalty, it really showed me how important this was to

them and I really respected that. They are so hospitable and beautiful. I started to see how Rewi fell in love with China and their people.

The fire station at Honghou was definitely a highlight for me, and not just because it was where we first had dinner. It felt really special to me as it was the first place Rewi Alley volunteered to help and this was the beginning of his long eventful life in China. This experience also made me respect Rewi Alley's hard work and dedication and it made me realise how strong a work ethic he must have had. The Chinese firemen seemed to work so hard in the heat of Shanghai in their fireman suits. Now that is work ethic!

At the Honghou fire station we also had a welcoming evening where the New Zealand Consul even came to speak, along with Kate and many of our Chinese peers - I can't quite remember all of their names yet: I find it hard to pronounce them and because of that, it's hard for me to remember.

After the fire station we went to the Shanghai board-walk on the Bund. It was simply beautiful. I was overwhelmed. I think Rewi Alley had the right idea living in China, everywhere I look I'm amazed.

In conclusion (for the day):

- I love it.
- I'm learning.
- I'm intrigued.

### **21.07.17 Shandan, the first time it rained!**

In the morning we left Xi'an for Shandan, Alice's home town and Rewi Alley's 2nd home town. It looked so much like where I live - it was kind of scaring to me - the high rolling hills blue and grey skies, the animals and the green countryside. Everything was green like my town.

First we stopped at the Rewi Alley library where a lot of the artifacts he had collected and gifted to the Chinese were on display. They were beautiful. We learned about the history and where the different artefacts had come from, it was quite interesting. I find that the Chinese culture is unlike anything you'd find in the western areas - so rich and old, I wish I could trace my ancestors back that far.

We then went on to see the tombs of Rewi Alley and George Hogg. We had a memorial service for George Hogg and we laid flowers for both of the men. We sang a tribute song and I suddenly felt the reality of actually being there and having the opportunity to be able to do what we westerners have done. This is all thanks to Rewi Alley and George Hogg, who built relationships and friendships thus allowing us to be there and I was overwhelmingly grateful.

We visited the Shandan Bailie School which Rewi Alley fundraised for in the last few years of his long life. [*He was also responsible for the setting up of the school*].

This is one of the places I found most interesting since I'm so fond of children: seeing everything that Rewi had done for them. It blew me away.

That day we also went on a hike. My feet were sore from all the walking we had previously done in the China heat that my body was not yet accustomed to. So Marina and myself just strolled along the valley by the river and prayed to the ancestors in one of the temples. This was an enlightening experience.

### **25.07.17 - The train ride.**

Talk about tight spaces. I felt like I was in a small box unable to move a muscle for 22 hours.

We were on a sleeping train to Beijing. Don't get me wrong it was a cool experience and I got a real feel for how far the rail system has come since the 2000s and what a privilege it was to be able to get from one place to the other, fast. But it was such a small sleeping area that I felt I was imprisoned and restricted to a one square metre. What was good though was that I was able to catch up on sleep and I slept in till 10am!! Woohooo!

I was offered a scholarship to study Mandarin at Lanzhou City University with accommodation, tuition, and food paid for but as much as I'd love so much to do it, I feel I don't have enough qualifications. It breaks my heart but after having been sick and unable to attend school for 4 years, I had to drop out and go to the polytechnic. While there my health quickly improved and I passed with 100% attendance.

But because of those years when I was sick, I don't think I have the necessary qualifications that would help me get accepted, sadly.

This day I found to be quite slow. We arrived in Beijing at 2:30pm and of course it was hot again but I was adjusting to the heat and I liked it a lot more than the cold weather back in New Zealand.

First we toured the Beijing Bailie University and talked to the students about their courses as well as meeting the presidents of the school and hearing what their school's philosophies are. I found it interesting how proud the students were of their school and how similar the building structures are to the high school in Japan where I had done a student exchange. It also had tall, large, concrete buildings, with beautiful gardens.

That night we ate Peking duck and it was heavenly. I really enjoyed it. I think I've enjoyed the local meals most from all the meals I've had in China. They have always been outstanding and memorable.

It was also the first night of staying at our last hotel in China. I must say every hotel we stayed in was outstanding, and staying in the hotels was one of the highlights not just because we got to sleep but because it was an experience I'd never had before. Being from a not very well off family, we never go on vacations or stay in hotels, we barely even go camping because petrol is so expensive. Let's just say it was something that really stood out for me.

- I'm grateful
- I'm happy
- I'm awestruck

### **26.07.17 - Tiananmen square.... the Great Wall**

I am still completely in awe of the sights we've seen throughout this trip, from Shanghai, to the Shandan scenery to the Great Wall. I didn't think it could get much better after the breathtaking views of Shanghai but it somehow did.

That morning we walked from our hotel to the National Chinese art museum to find that there was an hour-long wait to get in! We ended up walking to Tiananmen Square instead, as none of us had the energy to stand in line for that long after the busy week we had all had walking, climbing, running, and staying awake until ridiculous hours of the morning just to shower and wash our clothes.

I didn't regret it though. Tiananmen was beautiful, so big and clean, the gardens large and colourful. It was endearing to see such devotion to the national leaders, but strange for us because that doesn't happen in New Zealand. No one is as dedicated to the leaders in my home country as the Chinese to theirs.

We then went to a house where Rewi Alley lived in Beijing. It was a mansion, too big for one man and so well looked after even after his passing [*Rewi had the ground-floor apartment and Anna Louise Strong – another 'foreign friend of china, had the apartment above*]. It was here that Tuene and Kate both made a speech and we had lunch. It was so great

After this we travelled by bus to the Great Wall and I got a much-needed nap. Arriving there was surreal! I saw rows and rows of steep hills and for a moment I felt like I was back in New Zealand driving home. But then I saw the long never-ending wall of bricks going on as far as my eyes could see - for miles.

The view was heart-stopping. I had to rub my eyes to see if this was really happening. I couldn't stop smiling. It was one of the most unreal experiences I have had in my life so far and a feeling I'll never forget.

Pride: pride in myself for getting there, pride in myself for overcoming my illness and pride in myself for being able to say "I've climbed the Great Wall."

### **28.07.17 - The last day.**

I was pretty emotional, although we had already said goodbye to everyone, I hadn't yet said goodbye to China and that was the hardest part. Leaving a country I had grown to love.

It was a late start and Leanne brought us a yummy breakfast that was completely different to what we have in New Zealand and which I'm seriously going to miss. Also I will miss all those food banquets we ate and the Chinese hospitality. I can't believe this is our last day. It's so surreal. I feel like I arrived yesterday and yet I've lived here for years, it's a strange feeling.

The day was spent shopping: lots and lots of shopping, buying gifts and bartering. I really enjoyed it. First we went to quite a large market where we almost got into a fight when a lady called my roommate fat. Then I almost scared a lady to death with my steely "No thank you" after she attempted to pull me into her shop. Quite the drama!

On the way to the airport, we stopped at the art zone and looked at all the copper sculptures in the exhibition. They were beautiful. There were life-size animals, flowers, buildings and even furniture made out of copper. People say that America always tries to do things better but I actually think that saying should only be reserved for China. I'm still in awe of some of the things I saw.

We then stopped at another mall to finish off our shopping. It was so big and my feet were again getting sore. I must say the highlight of my day was actually seeing a man propose to his girlfriend on the way back to the bus to leave for the airport. It was a fantastic way to end the trip. One I'll remember forever.

*STACEY REIRI*