

## Michael Crook: Writing a new chapter of friendship beyond borders

**He Yan**

**O**n a late summer morning, the sky was clear and the weather fine. Kids were playing in the open, with laughter and joy in the air. It was Aug 28 when I met with Michael Crook and his mother, Isabel Crook, the recent recipient of the Friendship Medal of the People's Republic of China, on the campus of Beijing Foreign Studies University.

In my view, Michael Crook is a real Beijinger despite his foreigner's face. Born and raised in Beijing, he is nearly 70 years old and currently chairman of the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives.

Isabel Crook, 104, sat in a wheelchair, with a dog lying quietly at her feet. This Canadian was born into a missionary family in Chengdu, Sichuan province. In November 1947, Isabel and her husband, David Crook, entered the Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan Border Area to undertake an in-depth study of China's land reform



**Michael Crook and his mother, Isabel Crook**

movement in the village of Shilidian, deep in the Taihang mountains. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the couple taught at Beijing Foreign Studies University. Now, Isabel

advises the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives.

Isabel withdrew and Michael and I began our talk. At noon, we had

lunch together at a restaurant near the university.

“We have known each other for 13 years. This is our second private meeting,” he said brightly in pure Beijing dialect.

***Q: This year, 2019, marks the 80th anniversary of the resumption of activity of the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives. What led to the establishment of the group?***

A: The Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, marks the outbreak of an all-out war of resistance by the Chinese people against Japanese aggression. Many Chinese people lost their homes. Helen Snow, an American friend of China, came up with an idea to set up industrial cooperatives and mobilize refugees to work together. Her husband, Edgar Snow, an American journalist, was well-known for his work *Red Star Over China*. Mr and Mrs Snow, together with Rewi Alley, initiated the movement of industrial cooperatives, along with Chinese patriots.

When making the rules, Rewi Alley interpreted Gung Ho, the informal name of the group, as “work” (gung) and “together” (ho). So the slogan in English was also born: working together. It had been 10 years since Rewi Alley had come to China. He had worked for the Shanghai Municipal Council, serving as a fire supervisor and chief factory safety inspector. In 1933, introduced by American journalist Agnes Smedley, Alley met Soong Ching-ling, widow of Dr Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the modern republic of China.

Against the backdrop of the second cooperation between the Nationalist Kuomintang Party and the Communist Party and the formation of the anti-Japanese national united front, the movement of industrial cooperatives won support from both parties in China. On Aug 5, 1938, the Chinese Industrial Cooperation Association was founded in Wuhan. Soong May-ling, wife of the then Chinese president Chiang Kai-shek, served as honorary president and Kung Hsiang-hsi as president. She was Soong Ching-ling’s younger sister. Council members included Lin Boqu, Dong Biwu and Deng Yingchao. Alley was appointed acting director-general. Meanwhile, the Chinese government in power appointed him as adviser of the Executive Yuan.

In June 1938, Soong Ching-ling established the China Defense League in Hong Kong to rally global support for the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. With the efforts of Edgar and Helen Snow in promoting Gung Ho in such countries as the Philippines and the US, the group won support from many patriotic overseas Chinese and foreign friends. Soong Ching-ling persuaded the Hong Kong governor to support the founding of the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives in Hong Kong. Also, Ida Pruitt, an American born in China, actively mobilized international supporters worldwide.

In June 1939, the International Committee for Chinese Industrial Cooperatives was set up in Hong Kong, with Soong Ching-ling and Bishop Ronald Hall as honorary chairwoman

and chairman. When Ida Pruitt returned to New York, Chen Hansheng and Alley took over as secretary and executive secretary. In New York, Helen Snow and Ida Pruitt established the American Committee in Aid of the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives, also known as Indusco.

In 1941, Soong Ching-ling launched the Bowl of Rice Movement in Hong Kong. Donors paid enough for a rich meal only to get a bowl of rice. The funds raised were donated to Gung Ho to support its activities. By the end of 1945, Gung Ho had collected tens of millions of American dollars worth of cash and goods. China’s movement of industrial cooperatives became an important part of the anti-fascist united front of the world.

***Q: Please say something about Rewi Alley’s contribution to Gung Ho.***

A: Rewi Alley was a champion of Gung Ho. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai once praised him as a true-hearted and strong-minded friend of China.

When Gung Ho was founded, Alley first withdrew industrial equipment from Wuhan to Northwest China. With the Lianyungang-Lanzhou Railway already operating as far as Baoji, Shaanxi, some Chinese factories in the occupied areas were moved to Baoji, which became the most concentrated home of refugees. An office of Gung Ho was set up in the city and Baoji’s first cooperative consisting of seven blacksmiths was formed. Thereafter within two weeks, over 10 cooperatives were established based on the factory equipment that was brought into the city.

Alley chose Ganzhou to set up a



Southeast China office. Just one year later, nearly 130 cooperatives were formed in Ganzhou and its nearby areas. Chairman Mao Zedong met with Alley twice, once in 1939 and again in 1941. Mao agreed to set up a steering group and sent Liu Ding all the way from Yan'an to Shuangshipu town, in Fengxian county, Baoji, to support the movement in Northwest China. On Sept 25, 1939, Mao himself wrote a letter of thanks to Bishop Ronald Hall.

Alley's footprints spread across half of China. He traveled 30,000 kilometers to set up cooperatives. He was called the father of Gung Ho. In its heyday, there were 30,000 members of Gung Ho. About 300,000 people were employed. More than 2,000 cooperatives were set up, producing products to support the front lines.

There was an urgent need to organize refugees to work and offer them vocational training. In this context, the Bailie school was born. In 1941, Alley sent George Hogg, an Englishman who had graduated from Oxford University, to Shuangshipu town to take over the running of the Bailie school. Hogg had visited Shanghai in 1938 with his aunt on their journey around the world and he had chosen to stay in China. He later visited the liberated areas of North China, including Yan'an, as a foreign journalist. In 1945, fleeing the persecution of the Kuomintang, the Bailie school moved to Shandan county in Gansu province.

In 1952, the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives suspended operations. In 1953, Alley moved from Lanzhou to Beijing and



**Michael Crook (sitting right) and his father David (first left, back row) and mother Isabel (second left) in a family and friends outing in Xiangshan Park, Beijing in early 1950s. Rewi Alley (third, back row) joined them.**

lived in what is now the compound of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. He continued to work for world peace and development and made tireless efforts to resume Gung Ho.

On the occasion of China's reform and opening-up, the China Industrial Cooperatives Association resumed work in 1983 and Alley was honorary chairman. In 1987, the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives resumed operation, also with Alley as chairman. These two organizations have played an important role in the development of the cooperative economy in China.

***Q: Have you met Rewi Alley?***

A: Rewi Alley is part of my childhood memory. He was a friend of my parents. He cared about China's rural development, but in his spare time, he was fond of the outdoors. When I was a child, my family went hiking in Beijing's western hills almost

every weekend. Rewi was interested in hiking and archaeology. I remember once we were hiking up Yuhuangding together and saw some stone Buddhas. He looked at the Buddha statues and pronounced them to be from the Northern Wei Dynasty.

During our vacation to Beidaihe every summer, he and his friends, including George Hatem and Hans Mueller, often showed their swimming skills to us. Because he was 13 years older than my father, I called him uncle.

It is a pity that I seldom saw him after I grew up. For much of the 1970s I was in Britain, and most of the 1980s I was teaching in the US. When I came back to Beijing in 1988, he had passed away some months before. Later on, gradually getting to know about his efforts, I have been inspired by him.

***Q: What impression does Rewi Alley leave on you and others?***

A: During the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese

Aggression, my parents made friends with Rewi Alley. In 1936, my father, David Crook, was sent by the Communist Party of Britain to Spain to fight against fascism. After he was wounded in battle, my father was sent to recover at the hospital where Norman Bethune was working. There he read *Red Star Over China* and became interested in China.

In 1938, my father went to Shanghai from Spain. While planning to write some reports on the local workers, he asked who might help, and was advised to turn to Rewi Alley, who was also in Shanghai at that time. Rewi sent a young man to guide my father around. My father later taught in Shanghai's St John's University and then went to Chengdu where he fell in love with, and later married, my mother. There are many photos of old Shanghai taken by my father in the book *China Through the Lens of David Crook 1938-1948*, which was published two years ago.

In 1939, my mother, Isabel Crook, spent some months carrying out anthropological fieldwork in Bashinao village in the Aba Tibetan autonomous prefecture of Sichuan province. She found that it was time-consuming for villagers to spin yak hair into yarn by hand. On a trip back to Chengdu, she bought a new spinning wheel for villagers. One day when she was walking along the Minjiang River on her way to the village, a foreigner came toward her. Pointing at the spinning wheel carried by a porter, he said, without a greeting, "That was designed by me." Thus my mother encountered Rewi Alley. Later on, she joined the Gung Ho.

My grandparents were also in Chengdu then. My grandfather was dean of education at West China Union University. My grandmother wrote in a family letter, "An interesting speaker this afternoon, Rewi Alley — New Zealand", and shared some interesting stories about industrial cooperatives. One thing he said surprised me. In his words, these cooperatives should not be for profit but for mobilizing people to work together. Earl Willmott was a good Canadian friend of my grandparents at West China Union University. Bill Willmott, a child of Earl, later became president of the New Zealand China Friendship Society. When the Gung Ho delegation visited New Zealand in 2017, Bill Willmott told me a story about Rewi Alley. At the age of 6 or 7 years old, he wanted to be a firefighter. When they met, he was told that Rewi Alley was a fire chief. He admired that very much. Later on, Rewi gave him a model fire engine as a gift.

Rewi was kind to everyone, both old and young. Every time when my family and friends talk of him, they always praise him.

***Q: You have been chairman of the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives for a decade. How did you join it?***

A: I returned to China from the US in 1988. My mother told me there was work to do at ICCIC, "and you might as well volunteer to help edit the English version of ICCIC News Letter!" Back then, I was working for the Canadian International Development Agency in Beijing, and was responsible

for external publicity. I thus had a computer and photocopier. So the earlier English editions of ICCIC News Letter were compiled in my office.

The CIDA projects in China included poverty alleviation in rural areas. I traveled all the way to Yunnan province, Gansu province, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and other areas for my work. When I was young, I had been to work in the countryside for a while. I slept on a heatable adobe sleeping platform in the Red Star People's Commune and lived in a fellow villager's home. I had keen interest in rural affairs. According to my mother, the ICCIC primarily aimed to promote rural development. After a few months of tests, I joined the ICCIC.

My mother was then a member of the ICCIC Executive Committee. Under the charter, the ICCIC was to hold a general assembly every five years. During the intervening five-year period, the supreme decision-making body is the executive committee. There are more than a dozen members of that committee, most of them Chinese, including Yang Bo, Israel Epstein (Chinese citizen), Wu Weiran, Xu Gang, and others. Following Rewi Alley's death, the secretariat worked at his former residence, where the executive committee also convened.

Betty Chandler, one of Alley's old friends and a Canadian-born American, came to China in 1936. As Betty's eldest son and I were classmates at Chongwen Primary School, I went to her house occasionally to chat with her. One day, she said to me, "I am a member of the ICCIC Executive Committee and treasurer, but now that



I'm old, I don't have the energy. Why don't you take my place?" So, in the early 1990s, Betty submitted a proposal to the committee suggesting that I take over her post. At the meeting, they voted, and it was passed by a unanimous vote. Later, I was elected vice-chairman, and later chairman during term changes.

***Q: What has been done since the ICCIC resumed operation?***

A: After Alley passed away in late 1987, his old friend George Hatem became chairman of the ICCIC. The next year, George Hatem also died. In fact, when planning to approve the resumption of work, the government had already found Yang Bo, former Minister of Light Industry, to take up the job and support the ICCIC's work.

Following the resumption, the money in Hong Kong banks was released and the government also made some grants. Many senior members of the ICCIC called for a focus on areas where its campaigns had thrived in the past. From 1987 to 1999, it successively set up pilot areas for cooperatives in Honghu, Hubei province; Longkou and Penglai, Shandong province; and Shandan county, Gansu province; and helped a number of village-level industrial cooperatives in more than 20 cities and counties.

Several years later, we hired two experts, Zhang Xiaoshan, director of the Institute of Agricultural Development of the Academy of Social Sciences, and Dr Korina Hanna Richter, a German expert. They spent several months visiting almost all cooperatives and submitting an evaluation report to the executive committee. It led us to

the conclusion that financial support was far from enough. For example, the establishment of enterprises needed feasibility studies, market research, etc., and it was very tricky. Therefore, we decided to focus on training.

In 1995, the World Conference on Women was held in Beijing. Previously, we had begun to train women. Taking Beijing as an example, we held training sessions for the Tourism Cooperative, and trained such grass-roots level cadres as village Party committee secretaries or women's federation directors. When the conference was about to unveil, everyone began to pay attention to women's issues. Besides, we wrote articles to advocate the cause of cooperatives for Rural Women, a magazine of the Women's Federation. The circulation of this magazine was extensive, and women across China contacted us. The ICCIC has become increasingly known in China ever since.

In the field of rural finance, we piloted such trials as a micro credit program, which was later suspended. I personally believe that micro credit is an effective way to develop impoverished and vulnerable groups. In countries like Bangladesh and Malaysia, micro credit is well implemented. In recent years, China's cooperative credit has been introducing new policies. At present, cooperative credit remains to be further developed. Yet, we have accumulated a lot of experience in this regard.

We have also made endeavors in such areas as healthcare. Kathleen Hall, a New Zealand missionary, came to China in 1923. She first worked as a nurse at Peking Union Medical College

Hospital and later worked in Datong and Hejian. During the war against Japanese aggression, she set up a clinic in the village of Bei Songjiazhuang, Quyang county, Baoding city, Hebei province. Wu Weiran, a member of the ICCIC Executive Committee, was a kindhearted man who had served as president of the hospital and director of Beijing Hospital. Having heard that Kathleen Hall's Clinic would be rebuilt in 2001, he mobilized the medical community to donate materials and apparatus. In addition, the New Zealand China Friendship Society helped us raise funds in New Zealand, including from the New Zealand government, to carry out rural medical pilot projects in Hebei province.

We also remain committed to promoting legislation for cooperatives. Some former ICCIC members, like Israel Epstein and Wang Houde, who were members of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee, submitted proposals. Pat Adler, a member of the ICCIC Executive Committee and others have also repeatedly called for legislation. In 2007, China promulgated the first law on cooperatives — the Farmers Specialized Cooperative Law — to which ICCIC contributed its part.

***Q: How does the ICCIC conduct international exchanges?***

A: The ICCIC always remembers its old friends, and also makes new ones. In 2010, we became a member of the International Cooperative Alliance. Some friendly foreign organizations, such as the Society for Anglo-China Understanding and the New Zealand China Friendship Society,

are also members of the ICCIC. Dave Bromwich, president of the New Zealand China Friendship Society, is also vice-chairman of the ICCIC.

In the early 1990s, I knew a Belgian named Bruno Roelants. Initially, he came to China to study traditional Chinese medicine. Yet, he was introduced to a pioneer of the ICCIC and was deeply moved, so he changed his profession. He devoted his life to promoting the development of cooperatives and is now secretary-general of the International Cooperative Alliance.

When in Beijing, Roelants served as a representative of a Belgian development organization in China, Brothers of All Men. He proposed cooperation with the ICCIC, and that group was ICCIC's first overseas partner since the ICCIC resumed its work.

Canadian cooperatives are among the more highly developed in the world. At that time, I worked for the Canadian International Development Agency while also working for the ICCIC. Many of the cooperation projects of the Canadian International Development Agency had signed MOUs with the Chinese government, and the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation was mainly responsible for projects related to bilateral assistance. On behalf of Canada, I often went to the ministry for meetings.

The Canadian side also said that it was willing to establish cooperative relations with Chinese NGOs. I immediately proposed that we cooperate with the ICCIC as it fell within the scope of Canada's assistance in China, with a focus on remote areas, especially the development of the

western region, women's development, environmental protection and so on. In 1998, after Wang Houde took over as chairman, we signed an MOU with the Canadian Cooperative Association, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency. Our cooperation with Canada lasted until 2009.

The cooperative movement is global. Being British, I am proud that the world's first modern cooperative enterprise was founded in Britain in 1844 — the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers — which kick-started the modern cooperative movement.

In 1895, the International Cooperative Alliance was established in London, England, an independent nongovernmental international organization currently headquartered in Belgium. This organization has seven principles for cooperatives, including democratic decision-making, freedom to join the society, responsibility for their own profits and losses, care for the community, cooperation with their partners and so on. In order to implement these principles, it is necessary to exchange experiences with some foreign organizations. For example, an organization under the International Cooperative Alliance, called the CICOPA, has cooperated with us.

In his reply to the ICCIC and Beijing Bailie University in April 2017, President Xi Jinping fully recognized our work and encouraged us to usher in a new chapter of international friendship and contribute to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. The year of 2019 marks the 80th anniversary of ICCIC's

founding, and we held a symposium at Beijing Friendship Hostel that was attended by New Zealand's ambassador to China. A few years ago, the governor of New Zealand visited China, and I had the honor to accompany him to Soong Ching-ling's former residence. In November 2017, we went to New Zealand to attend a host of events marking the 120th anniversary of Rewi Alley's birth. When meeting with us, the governor of New Zealand noted that New Zealand had a historical relationship with the ICCIC.

The Cooperative Development Foundation of Canada has also maintained a cooperative relationship with the ICCIC for more than 20 years. In June 2018, we were invited to visit Canada, the Cooperative Housing Federation of Canada and representative housing cooperatives.

***Q: What is the ICCIC's outlook for the future?***

A: In 2020, the Fifth Plenary Session of the ICCIC will be convened. First of all, it is necessary to deliver a good job in the personnel arrangements for its Sixth Executive Committee and hold General Assembly elections, discuss and amend the Charter of the ICCIC and draft a high-quality work report on the plenary session. At present, the ICCIC and China Industrial Cooperatives Association each have their own emphasis on their work per their respective charters. In the future, the two organizations will be more closely connected and will work together to carry forward the spirit of Rewi Alley and push forward the cause of industrial cooperation in China. ■