

Shanghai Weather

 **Today**
Thunder
25/29°C (77/84°F)

 **Tomorrow**
Thunder
26/29°C (79/84°F)

 **Monday**
Thunder
26/29°C (79/84°F)

Today's AQI

 6am-noon
Good
Noon-8pm
Good

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CHINA VIEW

Finding Rewi Alley: Following the footsteps of China's most loved Kiwi



There is a bronze bust of Rewi Alley at Fushouyuan Cemetery in Shanghai's Qingpu District.
— Andy Boreham

As a foreigner living in China, it's easy to start feeling like you're just an irrelevant cog in a massive machine, and question whether you'll ever truly be able to make an impact here.

Those worries started to creep up for me during my months working from home under COVID-19, so I decided to dive deep into the life of a fellow New Zealander who not only left a huge mark here, but is still remembered fondly by millions of Chinese.

His name is Rewi Alley, and he first stepped foot on China's mainland at Shanghai's Shiliupu, or Dock 16, on April 21, 1927. He didn't know a single person in China at the time, but would go on to spend the remaining 60 years of his life here, eventually counting some of the country's greatest leaders among his friends and acquaintances.

What did Alley do?

Alley achieved a lot in his long life in China — definitely too much to detail in this column.

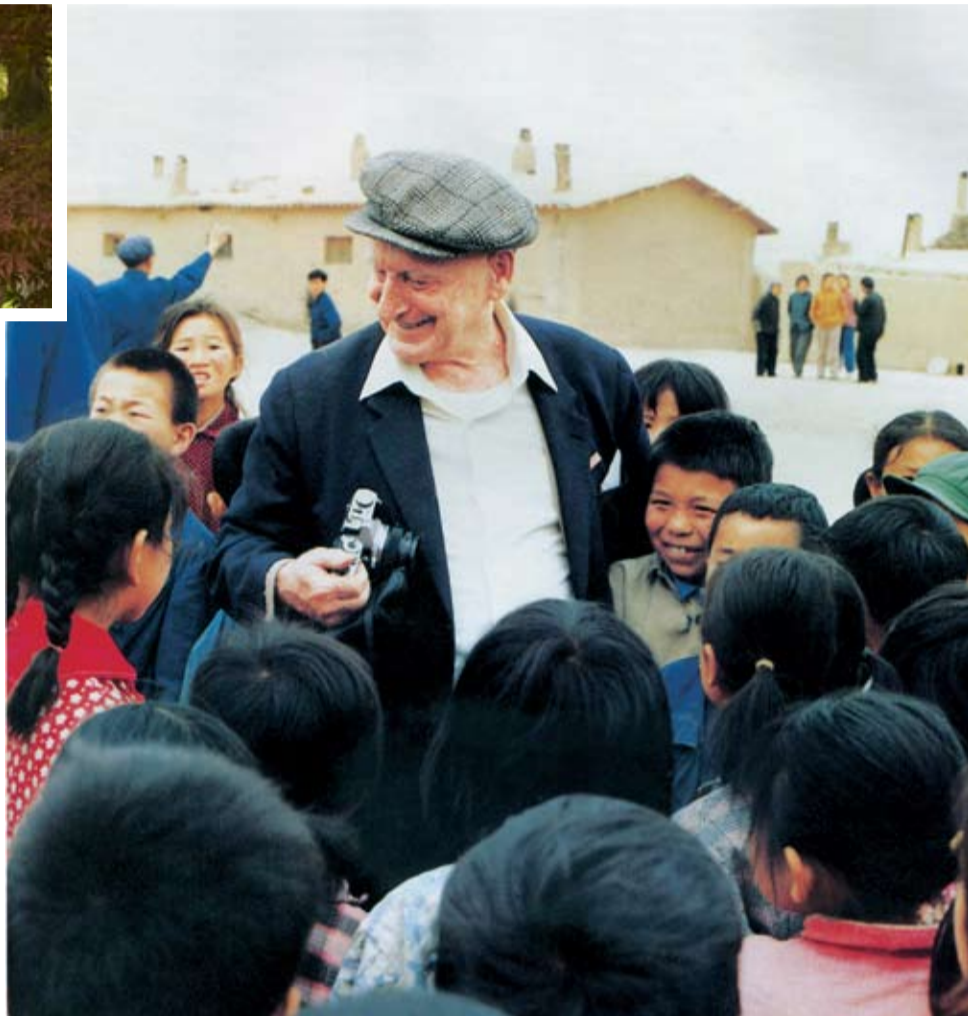
Dave Bromwich is president of the New Zealand-China Friendship Society, which Alley himself had a hand in setting up way back in 1952.

"I always consider Rewi has three, distinct legacies that are quite significant," he tells me over a shaky Zoom connection. "Establishing the Bailie education philosophy and schools, establishing the cooperative movement, expressed today as Gong He, and encouraging international peace and mutual understanding between peoples of China and foreign countries."

Alley's cousin, award-winning novelist Elspeth Sandys, explains who he was in simpler terms. He was "a great humanitarian, I would say — a man with almost no personal needs or feelings that he was owed anything."

Helping Shanghai

After he arrived in Shanghai, Alley secured a job within days as a sub-officer at what is now the Hongkou Fire Station. Soon he



Rewi Alley is surrounded by children during a visit to Shandan County in northwest China Gansu Province in 1982.
— Courtesy of China Reconstructs Press

was promoted to the role of chief factory inspector, where he was charged with ensuring the city's factories were up to standard. It was in that role that he began to see suffering daily.

"He witnessed and saw a lot of atrocious working conditions," Bromwich explains. "Children locked in factories working 12 hours a day, appalling conditions, no escape if there was a fire."

So Alley did his best to enact change.

"When he was a factory inspector he really started to put the boot in," Sandys remembers. "He would talk to factory owners and tell them they were murderers and they were child killers — you know, he didn't mince words."

Alley was able to secure some changes, including better-quality food for child workers, improved safety conditions and access to medicine.

Political awakening

When Alley first arrived in Shanghai, he wasn't very interested in politics. But Shanghai's White Terror, a period of time where suspected Communists were captured and executed by the Kuomintang, helped him decide where his allegiance lay.

During his later years in Shanghai in the late 1930s, Alley met some important internationalists who pulled him deeper into the politics of the time, ultimately

leading to him protecting numerous underground revolutionaries in his home, as well as setting up a radio on his rooftop to communicate with the Red Army outside the city.

"He didn't really become political until he had to," Sandys explains. "Until he really had to make a choice between the Nationalists and the Communists."

Leaving Shanghai

By 1938, Japan occupied most of Shanghai, except for the International Settlement. Alley decided it was time to leave to set up his Gong He industrial co-operatives around the country, away from Japanese controlled areas. That brought his decade in Shanghai to an end.

But the city remained an integral part of his China story.

Sandys is sure that Shanghai was a major factor in his life.

"Shanghai is far more essential to him than Beijing," she says. "Shanghai was where he became the Rewi Alley we know now, Shanghai made him into that person."

From 1953 on, Alley lived and worked in Beijing, spending much of his time writing, translating old poetry from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), and receiving important international guests.

He passed away on December 27, 1987, at the age of 90.



ANDY BOREHAM

Editor's Note:

Andy Boreham comes from New Zealand's capital city, Wellington, and has lived in China, off and on, for the past seven years. He has a master's degree in Chinese culture and language from Fudan University and is interested in all things related to contemporary Chinese society. He welcomes your feedback on all of the issues he covers. You can reach him at andy.boreham@shine.cn.



Scan the QR code to watch Andy's short documentary on Alley's time in Shanghai, "Finding Rewi Alley."