

‘SERVE THE PEOPLE’: REWI ALLEY, PROUD NEW ZEALANDER AND COMRADE OF THE CHINESE PEOPLE: An Interpretation

Sixty Years of Standing Together Through Thick and Thin. Fifty Years of Cooperation for Mutual Benefit and Win-Win Progress: A Symposium to Commemorate Rewi Alley’s Spirit and Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between China and New Zealand (Christchurch, 20 October 2022).

I Bruce Harding I

I am honoured to speak about what we call a ‘Magic Kiwi’ at this 50-year anniversary of Australia and New Zealand’s conjoint diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China by the Gough Whitlam and Norman Kirk-led Labour Governments in late 1972, after President Nixon’s epochal visit to Beijing in February 1972, which began the process of normalizing US-China relations after a 23-year freeze, with Nixon and Chairman Mao committing their nations, in a joint *communiqué*, to forswear the seeking of national hegemony. (I suspect that Rewi Alley was none too pleased by the Nixon welcome from Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai while the Vietnam War still raged.)

I dedicate my remarks today to my academic mentor and friend, the late Professor W.E.(‘Bill’) Willmott, who, alas, died a year ago. Bill’s parents were great friends of Rewi, and Bill later also became a valued friend to Rewi. Bill very graciously mentored me as a young sociology student, and our paths later intersected as he brought Chinese delegations to Rewi’s old school and, after that, when we were both Research Associates at the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Canterbury.

Named in honour of a feisty Māori chief, Rewi Alley described himself as “a loner” and an ordinary “country bumpkin” from New Zealand, but he was anything but that. While raised as a young boy in the rural South Island, Rewi’s were progressive parents in a conservative pseudo-English city. His beloved mother, Clara, was an agitator for women’s voting rights and his more stern father, Frederick, enthused in a socialist direction about the American reformer Henry George’s views of reform in land taxation and collective farming. Rewi was toughened by the family’s move from rural towns to Russley Road (Christchurch) and was not so much a loner as a slowly developing individual. He did not fit mainstream academic learning and recalled days at Wharenui School in Riccarton (where his father was the Headmaster) when he was strapped

across the hands up to five times in a day. Rigid English-style rote-learning provoked some boyish rebellion, but Rewi was not an academic failure, and so graduated to high school, following his elder brother Eric to enrol in the Christchurch Boys' High School (a feeder school to Canterbury College, the young university). That school was sited near the town centre and was no longer an exclusively fee-paying institution. Free places had been introduced by the reforming Seddon Liberal Government to make democratic access to learning easier. By the time Rewi enrolled there in 1912 the school had a manual/technical department and, because of its Second Master George Hogben's policies as Director of Education, for some boys schooling at CBHS mixed traditional academic learning with instruction in manual and technical skills (the Sloyd system). This was also the dual instruction model of the Bailie schools in China, and the combining of academic learning with practical skills at Sandan Bailie School from 1944 to 1949 dovetailed well with his memories of the old Boys' High School which he always remembered fondly. As a developing individual learning the way of hard work on the family farmlet, I suggest that Rewi enjoyed a wider brotherhood at Christchurch Boys', which may explain why he was so keen to enlist and fight in the imperialist First World War for King George V and Country, becoming a decorated war veteran after serving at Ypres and the Somme. He was following his brother (who was killed in that war) and other male role models at the Boys' High and must have, eventually, felt very disillusioned about that entire imperialistic conflict (although there seems no written statement of this). Bill Gammage has argued that in Australia, the myth of Great War participation "showed how the qualities of individuals might make nations great" and such involvement "proclaimed national distinctiveness" and demonstrated heroic warfare "as a test of men." Gammage added that the Anzac legend became "a forum for such conservative values as the necessity for loyalty, conformity to the state, and acceptance of middle-class quiescence." However, despite any later disenchantment by Rewi, it was also critical that on the Western Front he met some members of the Chinese Labour Corps, the first Chinese people Alley encountered at close range as human beings: "they were the first Chinese in our lives we had been able to meet on the level of mutual respect."

Rewi's Headmaster at Boys' High School was a University of Oxford graduate in classics, a little, simple-minded Cornishman-made-scholar and an ardent Anglican believer. From Charles (Bevan) Brown, Rewi gained a sense of Christianized Britishness and a mission to serve. Mr Brown was jingoistic and deeply Victorian in his robust 'manly' idealism, and he appealed to the simple snobberies of a conservative, property-owning sheep and wheat-trading society in the small market town of Christchurch. I suggest that Charles Brown influenced Rewi and many others to view military service to the British Empire as the highest form of sacrifice to preserve civilized

modern mankind. The man was decent but, frankly a misguided warmonger and recruiter for war with the most simple, conformist views, as Dr Beeby (another BHS boy) later asserted.

What I find interesting is that nowhere in his writings have I found Rewi reflecting on the obvious fact that a Marxist, materialist analysis of the Great War explains why New Zealand contributed so much of its prime manhood to 'save Belgium': that it was *really* protecting its security from so-called 'Asian hordes' and also safeguarding access to its prime market for its exported agricultural products. Kiwis needed to keep the Home Country viable to fund our existence as a developing colony (and now Dominion) enjoying the fruits of 'imperial preference' in trade. This is what membership in what the late Queen Elizabeth II called "our great Imperial family to which we all belong" was all about. Rewi sincerely believed in service, fought on the Somme and suffered terrible war-wounds at the battle of Cambrai-Baupame, returned to a 'land fit for war heroes', took up some marginal land in Taranaki, worked his guts out with his Boys' High mate Jack Stevens and walked away from that farming experiment after a serious economic recession, and must have been just starting to develop the seeds of radical ideas and doubts about his schooling, the free market system and how he could find a way in life. Jack went off and got married (Rewi may have been sexually inverted or Rewi's war wound may well have made him sexually incompetent.) While farming and labouring, he had read in the *Auckland Weekly News* of the 4 May 1919 Incident and Dr Sun Yat-sen's attempted 'Great Revolution' in China (1924-27). Anne-Marie Brady suggests that Alley initially went to China to seek employment as a foreign mercenary fighting in the successful Northern Expedition against Beijing of 1926-27. This war, against internal warlord forces and Britain and its Concessions, was led by Jiang Jieshi and was supported by the Soviet Union (it had hi-jacked the KMT in January 1926) and was a conjoint operation by the Guomintang and the Communists, which captured provinces near Beijing, but the unity fragmented in 1927 after CCP forces captured Shanghai from British control on 21 March 1927. Jieshi had placed the 'red terrorists' Mao Zedong and Mikhail Borodin on a hit-list and the KMT brutally slaughtered communists and ruthlessly suppressed them in favour of his own messianic Nationalist quest to rule China, all as Alley arrived in Shanghai to join the anti-imperialist revolt. So began his 60-year love-affair with ordinary Chinese people cruelly oppressed by both Chinese elites (e.g. the Kungs and Soongs) and Western exploiters. But Rewi took a while to emerge fully from his Christchurch chrysalis of mental conformity because, having missed that conflict, he arrived in Jiang's Shanghai and needed to use his past military service to gain employment as a fire inspection officer and, from 1932, became its Chief Factory Inspector where he became socially radicalized and really faced down the horrific abuses of young children in the Shanghai slums and in the Concessions (the

International Settlement). The Bund may have seemed sleek and civilized, but the corrupt capitalists and robber barons (*comprador bourgeois* Chinese as well as foreigners) distressed Rewi as he viewed hordes of famine-stressed refugees confined to intolerable labour in sweat-shops, many catching *beri-beri*. This confrontation with noxious profiteers and thuggish gangster types and the terrible waste and exploitation of human life in the crucible of evil that was Shanghai in that era led to Rewi's extraordinary dedication to the common-folk of China. Rewi described the city he sailed into in 1927 in words of righteous passion quite foreign to a Christchurch Boys' High Old Boy:

Modern Shanghai was founded by get-rich-quick foreign imperialist adventurers and opium traders who needed a place of their own exempt from Chinese supervision, safe and well-controlled by their own council, administration and police. A place from which to carry on their nefarious business. Based on predatory imperialism, it was a city of great wealth and vast poverty, developing certain types of industry, especially textiles, when cheap Chinese labor from a rotting hinterland became available. Chinese men, women and children, underpaid, often enough starving, many actually slaves, came to man its factories, create its amenities, and serve its every need. When wars and peasant risings made life for landlords and other exploiters in China less pleasant, Shanghai became a place of refuge and a haven for them. The Chinese underworld too found its paradise here. Shanghai ended up before Liberation as a city of extreme poverty for the many and extreme wealth for the few. It was a happy hunting ground for gangsters, pimps, prostitutes, adventurers and other exploiters, Chinese and foreign: a place where millionaires were made, and the beginnings of great fortunes amassed.

Quite understandably, Rewi hated corrupt elites like the Kung family and admired Chairman Mao, the poet and rebel, for his focus on empowering the worker-peasant people and for his belief in "the essential role of the poor and lower-middle-class peasant in the Chinese revolution" to overthrow imperialism and the reactionary warlord regime. Rewi was then a world away from Christchurch, but he must have recalled his old Headmaster's fervent imperialism and war-cries, as a negative object-lesson. As Rewi observed in 1971:

Confucius, so long ago, preached for the rulers decorum, filial piety and all the rest of it. His teachings were avidly taken by the ruling class and served to make feudalism last as long as it did in China. But Mao Tsetung puts his trust in the people. It is the people who are the deciding factor, he says.

Alley learned the lesson that one could carry out a political message through empowering ordinary people in production, and this use of what Marx called *praxis* became a key driver in Rewi's *Gung Ho* programme of 'Create and Analyze' and in his educational work in Gansu, where he applied his own experiences of struggle and pain

to serve others in a far worse situation in the imperialized China.¹ In 1929 Alley went to Inner Mongolia to oversee the building of a canal near the Yellow River, to provide irrigation to restore the land and help reduce the ravages of famine and later did sterling humanitarian work in Honghu. A Marxist study group of Westerners met in Shanghai and Alley joined them, seeing that the parlous state of Old China needed a revolutionary solution. From 1936 Comrade Alley took fulsome part in the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression, as what Edgar Snow called a human “Blitzbuilder”, a man “teaching China the constructive organization of guerilla industry”, as Alley tirelessly criss-crossed occupied China and spear-headed an international campaign to solicit funds for the 3,000 *Gung Ho* industrial co-operatives which were so useful in resisting the Japanese forces (c.500,000 troops). Alley also warned New Zealanders that China was the front-line, in terms of forward defence, against further aggressive Japanese expansionism into the Southwest Pacific, and the first Labour government (of M.J. Savage) took heed of this and strongly supported resisting Japanese fascist aggression at the League of Nations, even to the point of economic sanctions and establishing an international force.¹⁶ Carl Berendsen, CMG, Permanent Head of the Prime Minister’s Department (Wellington), received a report from diplomat R.M.Campbell in London concerning distressing malaise he observed at Geneva and Brussels in the League and 1922 Nine-Power Treaty conferences on “Sino-Japanese affairs” because violations of the Covenant and other relevant treaties did not move European governments, which “are able mostly to proceed on the assumption that their people feel so strongly for peace that they will acquiesce in anything rather than resist”. Campbell added, very sadly and in clear disgust:

The spirit of Geneva, 1937, was that “we must not appear to let China down” (with all the emphasis on ‘appear’) and that we must not lead her to expect assistance; to assist China, we must see that she does not ask for anything that would call the United States Neutrality legislation into effect; and likewise we must be scrupulously impartial and fair minded to Japan—even the much quoted phrase by her Premier “beat China to her knees” was not allowed to pass in a draft League Committee report.

Based in Wuhan, Alley, the practical, energetic ‘atom’, fought the Japanese blockade and used the *Gung Ho/Gonghe* industrial movement to revitalise Chinese industry which had been reduced to 20% of its former capacity. The industrialization of the village by creating a network of machine co-operatives in the hinterland supplied, for instance, three million blankets, and even hand-grenades, for the KMT in the fight against Japan. From 1944 Alley worked with a young Englishman, George Hogg (a very different ‘Oxford man’ from Rewi’s old Headmaster Brown), in a school which they moved to Sandan in China’s remote Northwest, to train peasant boys in a wide range of

technical skills in what Hogg called a 'university for the common man'. Rewi wrote a moving tribute to Hogg (who died of tetanus in July 1945) in a superb book called *Fruition: The Story of George Alwyn Hogg* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1967). In 1942, before the triumph of Mao and Zhou Enlai (the 'War of Liberation'), Jiang Jieshi discharged Alley from Indusco, as it was becoming a dangerous, radical precedent for the Nationalists committed to comfortable crony capitalism and market monopoly. He was later to be dismissed as headmaster from the Sandan Baillie School when the International Committee of *Gung Ho* was wound up in 1951 and the school was absorbed into the Ministry of Fuel to train oil workers, then removed to Lanzhou in 1953-54.

Rewi was very sad and lost for a long time after this, deeply missing the Sandan experiment, and he returned to New Zealand in 1954, but he strenuously wished to remain in the PRC and serve the New China after 1 October 1949. Rewi did that to good effect, in travelling as a spokesman for the new regime and its class war at various peace conferences (starting with the Peace Conference of the Asian and Pacific Region in Beijing in October 1952), as the Cold War settled over the world like a dark cloud, starting with the Korean War, gathering force as the Soviets fell out with China (1959-61) and as a nuclear arms race enveloped the Big Powers (including the PRC). Right-wing politicians in New Zealand denounced Rewi as a 'Red traitor', but he outlived them and forged many fruitful ties of friendship, such as our sister-city link. Rewi began to translate old T'ang dynasty (and other) poetic texts, and then wrote poetry of his own which fervently celebrated the heroic struggle of the masses of ordinary Chinese committed to liberating 'Mao Tsetung Thought' ranged against the grim legacies of feudalism and capitalism in the Old China. In Rewi's words, "A new culture is coming in, and though much of the old still remains in the thought of people, the new is so strong it steadily erodes all that is unscientific, all that holds back the creativeness of liberated minds." Alley, the old Marxist-Leninist cadre could not say the same about his birth-land, sleepy smug New Zealand, then mired in conformity and alarming him after it signed, with Australia and the United States, the ANZUS Treaty in 1951. Almost certainly in response to this, and during the Korean conflict, in 1952 Alley established the New Zealand-China Friendship Society, given Australasian fears of a resurgent 'Yellow Peril' (whether that be from 'Red China', Vietnam or Indonesia). Rewi kept up his war of words in favour of Mao's regime and may have shared President Xi Jinping's view that the Cultural Revolution ultimately strengthened China, so that when from May 1966 the PRC was convulsed with the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, Alley was inspired by a suggestion of his old friend Zhou Enlai to travel across China and see, and then report, progress during those difficult years. The result was his comprehensive 588-paged book, *Travels in China 1966-71* completed in late 1971, which was an epochal

year for Western normalization. Rewi returned to New Zealand in 1971 to visit family and to reassure his own people after China had been admitted, with full membership²⁴, to the United Nations that year. Gough Whitlam wrote of moving Australia “out of the long shadows of the fallen empires”, reflecting that “When I was elected as [Queen Victoria’s] great-great granddaughter’s Prime Minister in Australia [1972], I had the satisfaction of collaborating with my New Zealand counterpart [N.E. Kirk] in ending the military and financial support for the ruinous rulers of South Viet Nam[,] which had never been extended by our counterparts and their predecessors in the United Kingdom, Canada and the Queen’s other realms and territories.” I can recall hearing Alley broadcasting about this in 1971-2, and I am sure that he met with leaders in Wellington, especially Norman Kirk (of this city) as then Leader of the Opposition, and Alley doubtless played a quiet role in ushering in New Zealand’s full recognition of Communist China as a member of the family of nations fifty years ago, and which we are rightly commemorating today.

Rewi Alley’s was a long, tempestuous and deeply productive journey from his humble upbringing in a tiny outpost of the dying British Empire into becoming an iconic figure for positive communal change in the New China: a fusional figure in many guises. In 1954 he asserted that the rest of the world needs the peace-loving Chinese, who “press forward with their tasks like a mighty wave engulfing the sorrows and tragedy of the past and advancing ever higher up the gleaming sands”, in *their* version of Maoist heroic materialism. Even before he was starting to feel somewhat deprived of this ardent faith, the Sinophile Rewi movingly declared his ultimate fealty to both countries: “I remain a New Zealander, but I have become a Chinese too.”