

Paper for: The International Forum ‘Rewi Alley Internationalist Spirit and Construction of One Belt Road’, Shandan, Gansu, PRC,
20th Sept 2016

The *ren* (仁) of Rewi, the spirit of Rewi Alley and its practical application

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Throughout history, and across all regions of the world, there have emerged men and women of virtue, energy and ability. In his sixty years in China, Rewi Alley is one such person. This paper will explore the foundation of what allowed this man from the other side of the world to make a lasting impact on 20th century China, what retains his legacy through until today, and how he may continue to provide an impact on the future.

Factors will be considered from a philosophical perspective, both western and Chinese, and from the social and political environment in which Rewi Alley found himself. There will be a focus on his first 25 years in China, as it is in this period that Rewi Alley flourished and expended his incredible energy to greatest effect. The paper will then consider extensions of how his spirit through his legacy has been continued in modern China, and consider issues needed to maintain this momentum for a young generation.

Foundations of the spirit of Rewi Alley

In his autobiography, Rewi acknowledges that he was ‘certainly fortunate’ with his parents. He identifies elements in his father that were ‘pretty progressive’ for his day, a great believer in social progress and ‘a socialist before his time’. He did not allow his children to attend Sunday School, the weekly Christian meeting for children, because “he did not want them to have beliefs forced upon them before they were able to make decisions for themselves, or understand their own lives” (Alley, 1997, p.9).

His mother was a woman of ‘great ability, balanced and thoughtful’ and was a participant in the women’s suffragette movement that led to New Zealand being the first country in the world to give women the vote in 1893. He notes that she was a woman ahead of her time, intensely practical with a great belief in the future of mankind. It was recollection of her smile that gave him strength whenever he was in a tough situation throughout his life (Alley, 1997, p.10).

Rewi Alley himself tells us that in fact when he arrived in China he had not developed a strong political or social ideology (Alley, 1997, p.55). This, then, gave him freedom to grow, not from a platform that had been formed by a belief system or directed by an externally imposed duty. What followed can be considered from a western philosophical concept of ‘voluntarism’.

"Voluntarism, sometimes referred to as voluntary action, is the principle that individuals are free to choose goals and how to achieve them within the bounds of certain societal and cultural constraints, as opposed to actions that are coerced or predetermined."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voluntarism_\(action\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voluntarism_(action))

This can be further supported by a sense of accountability or moral responsibility that originates within the person. It views people as individuals who are the initiators of action from their will. For the purpose of this paper, it is enough to consider that Rewi Alley acted from his innate sense of humanity and a developed sense of rightness and wrongness, and this is an essential part of what we often refer to as the 'spirit' of Rewi Alley.

Voluntarism should not be confused with volunteerism, which primarily considers that people are prepared to act for no financial reward, as volunteers. This concept is less useful in understanding the motivation behind Rewi Alley's contributions to the development of modern China. His was a life's work that went beyond taking some time off to do good deeds; rather, he was driven by his will to serve the people of China.

Some sense of voluntarism can be found in Rewi Alley's own consideration of his achieved place in China. He wrote that after his introduction to China, through his work in Shanghai, voluntary relief work and travels, "I became determined not to be one of the big greedy people. They have their servants, but I would not be one of them. They declared war on the people; I declared war on them. This thought gave me courage and strength to go on. It was just my own resolution to work out the best I could, but it was this thought that carried me out of Shanghai to start the Gung Ho project in the hinterland after the war broke out" (Alley, 1997, p.54).

However, the western philosophy of ethical voluntarism still proves to be inadequate to fully comprehend Rewi Alley, and it is within elements of traditional Chinese philosophy that a greater understanding can be developed. This approach can be used not only to explore Rewi Alley's spirit, but also to examine the social and political environment within which he acted, and which received him and appreciated his work.

The Confucian ethical principles of *ren*, 仁 and *yi*, 义 are deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society. *Ren* was considered by Confucius as the primary virtue that guides a nation and how its people act. It can be defined as benevolence, perfect virtue, goodness, human-heartedness, or by Confucius using the word for love, but a big love, or '大爱'. The structure of the character 仁 encapsulates the concept of man and the number two, suggesting that no one is alone, and emphasising the relationships between people, family, the nation and the world. It is not learned, but is innate, recognising the worth of all people independent of station in life, and valuing respectful treatment of all as a consequence of this recognition. It thus becomes a guiding element in the development of an altruistic path through life.

Mencius, the celebrated scholar of the Confucian school, says of *ren*: "The feeling of compassion is the origin of benevolence." Compassion is a softness of heart, sympathy or pity. In ancient China, benevolence was considered to be the master virtue, so compassion is not just the origin of benevolence; it is the most important of the four attitudes, and can be seen as the source of all morality. Benevolence is the characteristic element of humanity. It is treating people as people, or acting to people with humanity (He, 2015, p.18).

Confucius' *ren* is, then, the fountainhead from which all virtues flow. It implies love, compassion, humanity and equality, expressed through a sense of humility. It brings harmony resulting from the loving benevolence in us.

In Rewi Alley's relationships with people he met and worked with, a true sense of *ren* can be discovered, but it is not only as expressed through Rewi Alley's actions and deeds that *ren* is useful. Indeed, within the common people and communities of China with whom he interacted, there existed an appreciative social environment innately understanding these virtues, and recognising the spirit of Rewi Alley.

The second Confucian virtue is that of *yi*. *Yi* can be broadly defined as morality, an ethical set of moral principles that lead to an understanding of righteousness and right action. The development of *yi* can be explained by Mencius: "The feeling of shame and dislike is the origin of rightness." In this tenet, Mencius highlights both the fundamental nature of this sense – that is, the sense of what is right is first and foremost a prohibition on evil; it is a sense of shame and distaste for evil. If compassion is a motivator for virtuous conduct, then shame and dislike are negative motivators..." (He, 2015, p.18).

Rewi Alley's book, *Yo Banfa*, written in the early 1950s, is a recollection of a wide range of travels, encounters, activities and events that vividly represent his innate *ren* and the development of his *yi*. He repeatedly presents the quality of the Chinese people he works with, especially when they are engaged in collective work for the good of the people. In his foreword, Joseph Needham captures this, writing "he spoke of the profound humanity of the Chinese folk and the revolutionary activities of those who were determined that it should blossom forth in fullness and freedom from age-old oppression" (Alley, 1976, foreword). The spirit with which the common people work together, presented as a paradox to the behaviour of officials in relief work in Inner Mongolia, "came as a realisation of the power of the Chinese peasants when organised around a task they wanted to do" (Alley, 1976, pp 60-61).

Conversely, he regularly records examples of terror inflicted on the people, and indifference to abject human suffering expressed by the then foreign rulers, Guomindang, local gangs and warlords, and Japanese. These observations led to the Alley's feeling of shame and distaste, and the development of his *yi*.

In a discussion with Agnes Smedley (Alley, 1976, p.15), Rewi Alley reports his witnessing the execution of "a group of lads" branded as communists for "agitating" for better conditions by a "scruffy KMT officer" to the glee of a "fat boy in silk gown and cap". "It suddenly became very clear to me that the only way was basic change. Agnes leaned forward and gripped my wrist. 'Then let's get along with the changing of it,' she said firmly."

Courage also fits into this virtue of *yi*. For Mencius, courage is not physical bravado, but a determination to do one's duty, whatever the obstacles, in a right way; the courageous action required to implement what is delivered with an attitude of 'you banfa', there is a way! Alley also records his enthusiasm and optimism for the opportunities that the new China was presenting people, and the responses of the people at that time to the opportunities.

Helen Foster Snow, in her book *China builds for democracy: a story of Cooperative Industry*, captures the character of Alley as "furious against corruption and selfishness, he has infinite patience with the underprivileged class whose lot he has tried to improve for so many years. He has ... sympathy for the underdog, and a soul of generosity and kindness" (Wales, 2004, p.61).

It is necessary to acknowledge at this point that it is unknown by the author what attitude Rewi Alley had to the Confucian virtues, and assumptions have been made to interpret the

spirit of Rewi Alley along these lines. In this discussion, it is a natural extension to consider the Confucian sense of *li*, 礼. While this is broadly defined as the rites by which all aspects of social governance should be addressed, from government down to family affairs, the conservatism with which this is practised could explain the appalling attitudes expressed not only to the suffering people, but also to other underclasses, especially women. This ‘virtue’ did not sit at all well with Rewi Alley, and its practice in that chaotic time appeared as a contradiction to the *ren* and *yi* virtues.

Whatever analysis is given to the foundation of the spirit of Rewi Alley, there is no doubt that he holds a sincere place in the collective memory of the people and government of China. To retain the reverence of China so significantly for three decades after his passing is proof enough. In China an internet poll of 56 million participants held in 2009 voted Rewi Alley into the Top Ten Influential Foreigners in China in the 20th century. Top level bilateral engagements between NZ and China continue to acknowledge the role of Rewi Alley in the foundation of this relationship.

While there are some western analysts of Rewi Alley and his life and time in China who wish to cast some uncertainty on his reasons for spending sixty years of his life there, it is a supposition that such detractors have failed to understand the altruism and commitment Alley felt and expressed in his chosen road. There is little understanding of the innate quality of the man that directed his energy to serving the people of his beloved and adopted large family, 大家.

Contemporary practice of the legacy of Rewi Alley

What, then, is the value of commemorating Rewi Alley in this, the end of the third decade since his death? If the reason is purely to remember a national hero of the people, and acknowledge the great contribution he made to rebuilding China, and his contribution to international peace, especially the relationship between New Zealand and China, then we lose a great opportunity. I would now like to discuss some contributions that Rewi Alley’s legacy has made since his death, and then consider how this may be continued and enhanced into the future.

The discussion on expressions of Rewi Alley’s legacy will focus on the promotion of cooperatives as a rural community development tool. Of all his work, Gung Ho 工合 perhaps made the most significant impact on China’s battle for survival in the late 1930s and 1940s period, and it has been revived in the last several decades. With the passing in 2007 of the *Law on Specialised Farmer Cooperatives*, opportunity for implementing successful and sustainable cooperatives and the impact of these cooperatives on rural communities and rural economies has been greatly enhanced.

A programme of cooperative establishment training has been delivered in north-west China from 2006. It is estimated that up to the end of 2013, this programme has assisted over 20,000 households to improve their income and wellbeing through membership of cooperatives. This has been through an approach to establish model cooperatives either through assisting new cooperatives to register, or through enhancing existing cooperatives. The details of this programme are published in this book under the paper title “*Carrying on the Spirit of Rewi Alley: Promoting Cooperative Development in North West China*”. The programme displays the spirit of Rewi Alley expressed through collaboration with his three key legacies: Gung Ho, Shandan Bailie School and New Zealand China Friendship Society.

An early analysis of this approach has been researched and published in 2014 in the booklet *Cooperative Case Studies*, written by Liu Guozhong and Tim Zachernuk with funding, appropriately, through the Rewi Alley Friendship Exchange fund, provided to NZCFS by China Oceania Friendship Association (Youxie) and China Friendship Foundation for Peace & Development.

Published in both Chinese and English versions, this gives an analysis of the existing social, economic and policy environment for cooperative development, and includes ten case studies of cooperatives that have been assisted through this training programme. One consistent theme that is clear in the success of cooperatives is the quality of the leadership that emerges in a supportive environment. Stories of the leader's rise to establishing successful cooperative enterprises show the latent ability of people in poor communities whose main constraint was a poverty of opportunity. Ambition with courage, and entrepreneurial skills combined with hard work and perseverance are represented in the people who lead the cooperatives in the case studies.

The same virtues that we have seen in Rewi Alley are also apparent, with the spirit of working together to achieve improved livelihoods for cooperative household members and benefits for the community as a whole. In his autobiography, Rewi Alley notes, in his summation of the lessons learnt from Gung Ho as a people's movement, that the 'type of people with the necessary capacity and ability to go forward in almost any line exists abundantly in the village' (Alley, 1997, p. 175).

This programme has also had a focus on promoting women's position in society, with a number of the cooperatives having women as leaders, and encouraging women's participation in leadership roles. The success of cooperative development today supports the understanding and confidence that Rewi Alley had for the people of China. In every rural community there is an innate passion to work together through a presence of *ren*, 仁, and an expression of *yi*, 义. Where the community was previously poor, the strength of the people can overcome a distinct poverty of opportunity through working together.

Since 2014, through the financial contribution of Mr He Wanying, the chairman of Shaanxi Huabin Energy Company Ltd, the cooperative promotion programme made a change in approach, offering specific training workshops that target different sectors, and/or specific training needs. A focus has been made on the handicrafts sector, and this can provide an example of the positive outcomes that successful cooperatives can provide to community and household development. This industry provides valuable productive opportunity that can be adapted to individual work done at home or in cooperative work stations. It not only provides a financial return to remote and poor households, especially in long winter months, but also enhances wellbeing through a sense of personal satisfaction from producing an income through individual endeavour. Cooperative membership in the women's handicraft industry provides a broad market that is otherwise difficult to access for isolated handicraft workers. It also provides valuable community services, from social contact to assisting women and girls with disability to lead a productive life.

Training workshops have targeted specific needs for cooperative leaders and members. These include marketing, and understanding broad aspects of the supply chain; financial record keeping and planning; communication within cooperative membership and the broad range of stakeholders required to build a successful cooperative business.

The concept of "One Belt, One Road" is of relevance here, and not only as a trading route. Certainly, the marketing of products from a Hui Women's handicraft cooperative to countries

further west on the old silk road is a fine example of this. But in the broad sense, internationalism, is an essential aspect of this concept.

An interpretation of “One Belt, One Road” can be made through the idea of the Silk Road as being an avenue for exploring and establishing international relationships along various themes, with the internationalist spirit of Rewi Alley as one such focal point. New Zealand is far from the traditional concept of the Silk Road, yet has played a role in the internationalisation of the North West of China. There is the tangible contribution of a flock of New Zealand sheep, which arrived in Shandan in 1956, after the first flock was lost in Tibet! More so, through Rewi Alley, many New Zealanders have spent time at Shandan Bailie School contributing to new technology training, agriculture and medical approaches, through to the English teachers of today. New Zealand continues to play a role in further sustainable development of the North-west. This brings the outside to Gansu, but has also been instrumental in encouraging two way exchanges. The long running Rewi Alley scholarship, funded by the New Zealand government until 2010, gave opportunity for a stream of Shandan and Lanzhou teachers to study in New Zealand. Furthermore, there is value to be gained from New Zealand agricultural expertise to be brought to this difficult geographical region.

Protecting the legacy of Rewi Alley through retaining his spirit

The world is undergoing rapid change, significantly enhanced through modern communication technologies. The changes that China has undergone in a very short timeframe are perhaps as dramatic as anywhere in the world, coming in less than seventy years from a feudal landlord based society operated within a conservative and often corrupt Confucian hierarchical social and political structure; and from an economic base of poverty and undeveloped technologies to an economic powerhouse in less than thirty years. Today, young people are far removed from the old society, with heads bent down on mobile phones a common characteristic of today’s society. This is a very appealing technology, with its exponentially expanding opportunity for communication, and with new financial structures allowing shopping, banking, travel all to be done reliably and efficiently.

However, many of the old values are being lost, and the new culture of communication can often be seen as a distraction. The joke of today is of a group of young people sitting together and having a chat through social media on their mobiles, rather than talking directly to each other, sending photos rather than looking at each other! Concerns emerge as to how this will impact on society. Are young people losing the very Chinese value of community serving the people, with the community being above the individual? Are individuals losing their sense of responsibility to the community in the quest for self-interest expressed through superficiality?

If we accept that the virtue of *ren* is innate, there is a potential for positive outcomes to be retained. However, it is important for opportunity be available for this to be expressed. In *Yo Banfa*, Rewi Alley has described a corrupt and despotic society through his experiences in the thirties and forties, where neglect and indifference to extremes of suffering suppressed the common people, in favour of those who are totally self-serving. He also describes the rapid changes and optimism that came through opportunities in a new and just society.

Perhaps society is now experiencing another self-serving period, albeit mild in comparison, and there is a need for new opportunities for people to express their innate *ren*, and to develop a modern appreciation of *yi*.

Certainly, China has made rapid progress in economic growth and its international presence, but is it at the expense of moral decay? He (He, 2015, p.2) is optimistic when he says, “I

believe what Mencius said: ‘Humans all have the feeling of compassion’. Our fundamental sense of sympathy and community are real, but it is often weakened by a range of influences to the point that it no longer disciplines us and drives our conduct”. He goes on to present a challenge to generate a ‘new ethical framework to underpin a new social morality’ through ‘an interrogation of these old (Confucian) traditions’ (He, 2015, p.4).

Commemoration of Rewi Alley’s 120 + 90 + 30 years (birth, arrival in China, death) is an opportunity to not just recall the great contribution that he made in China’s struggles and reconstruction. It is a chance to develop opportunity for the young generation to rediscover their *ren*, to develop their *yi*, and to express these virtues in a modern way in China today. If indeed *ren* is innate, then through opportunity, *ren* will be expressed.

The cooperative structure is one such opportunity for young people to grow away from a self-centred life to one of rich rewards through serving the community, and through working together for a common goal to enhance the wellbeing of fellow citizens. But more than this, in broad training programmes, there is opportunity to institute curriculum which includes consideration for new interpretations of these concepts and values. This can encourage a confidence in young people to lead and express these virtues among their peers, in their career paths, develop a personal satisfaction in their lives that is lacking in self-serving lives. Further, instilling compassion into individuals’ approach to their place in society can enhance social capacity and contribute to healthy communities.

The celebration of Rewi Alley’s life is a perfect time to consider new meaning to old virtues, and new application to a changed society. Rewi Alley lived and worked through dramatic times in his life, and especially through great changes in China. Perhaps it is best to consider the question: What approach would Rewi Alley take today? In this way we can appropriately commemorate and celebrate him, and protect the legacy he has left us through ongoing action directed by his spirit, with modern characteristics.

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