

Random Thoughts on My Seven Visits to Shandan

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It was late April, 2006. While Beijing had not got rid of repeated attacks of floating dust from the north, I was on board the K43 train towards the Tengger Desert in the northwest, with Shandan in the Hexi Corridor of Gansu as my destination.

This was my seventh trip to Shandan. This small town on the ancient Silk Road, lying between the snow-capped Qilian Mountains and the mixed red-and-green Yanzhi Mountain, has a glorious past. It had been mistaken for the Chinese capital by the Arab merchants but later waned to a desperate state with her people living in abject poverty and misery for decades until the 1940s. The founding of the PRC brought social order and economic development, but poverty and unfavourable natural conditions prevented Shandan from extricating itself from the status of recipient of the Central Government's "Poverty Alleviation Fund" for another 20-30 years

Had there been no such "legend" as Rewi Alley's success in creating the Shandan Bailie School—a new type of education integrating study with production in the wartime—Shandan would not have been known to so many people in China and won so much support from overseas. A staff member of Youxie like myself whose work involves lots of travel, would never have thought of going to Shandan, let alone tied myself so closely to such a place in the later years of my career.

My first trip to Shandan was in June, 1982, when I acted as interpreter for Rewi Alley and Bob Spencer, the New Zealand doctor who helped build the school hospital of the old SBS, at the 40th anniversary celebration of the birth of the school and the opening of the new Shandan Museum for Alley's donated cultural relics. It was the first time the teachers and students of the original SBS had reunited in Shandan since the school closed in 1951. It was also the first time for the public to see Rewi Alley's collection of more than a thousand historical treasures on display in this small county.

This special occasion turned out to be a grand festival for Shandan and Gansu Province as a whole. It aroused tremendous interest and had a very positive impact, lending a great impetus for soliciting support from various circles to re-establish the Bailie School. Consequently, when I went there the second time in 1987, a new Shandan Bailie School, devoted to training in agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry, opened on April 21, the anniversary of Rewi Alley's arrival in China. For years Rewi Alley had thought hard about the feasibility of re-establishing the school in the hope of training young workers to improve the poor environmental and living conditions of the Northwest. To his disappointment, Rewi Alley was not able to join the students in celebrating the opening because of poor health.

Soon after this, in September 1987, the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Co-operatives (ICCIC, or *Indusco*, also known as Gung Ho) announced its revival in Beijing, having been dead since the wartime Gung Ho movement ended in 1952. Now the two life-long wishes of Rewi Alley—reviving Gung Ho and the SBS—had both been fulfilled.

It was sad that Rewi Alley had passed away by the time I made my third visit to Shandan in 1988. I was then among the representatives of the Chinese and New Zealand governments and Rewi Alley's friends and relations who attended the memorial services in his memory. Out of love for his second home, Rewi wrote in his will that he would like to have his ashes scattered over Siba Tan, where the SBS had its school farm. Alan Alley, Rewi's adopted son, scattered some of the ashes from a helicopter, followed by a ceremony

for laying part of the ashes to rest in the Rewi Alley-George Hogg Grave by the Ruoshui River. He would be happy to rest in peace with his young colleague, the beloved English headmaster of the SBS who died in Shandan in 1945.

During the ten years from 1989 to 1999, I went to Shandan three more times. By then, I had retired from Youxie and become a volunteer for ICCIC working for Gung Ho. Apart from my concern of the SBS, I formed a new working relationship with the Shandan people of different fields, because the county was chosen by ICCIC to be one of three Gung Ho experimental co-operative centres. My three visits were for attending project meetings, organizing training sessions and experience-exchange seminars, or making study tours of various co-ops. Each visit contributed to drawing me nearer and nearer to the economic and social life of Shandan. What impressed me most were the ordinary Shandan people: they are sincere and forthright by nature, tough, hard-working and fearing no hardships in their prolonged struggle for a better life. However, the long years of poverty and isolation from the center of the country have restrained them from bringing out their pioneering potentials and creativeness into full play. Lack of ideas for seizing every opportunity, weighing pros and cons carefully or paying attention to efficiency have hindered their progress, while “waiting, relying and demanding” as a recipient of government aid have formed a habitual mode of thinking for many people. This could be seen in many cases in the Gung Ho experimental projects. I think it is crucially important to examine the subjective as well as objective factors for the failure in achieving expected results from the experimentation in Shandan. It will serve as a good lesson for the healthy development of Gung Ho in the long run.

With the change of time and events, Shandan has seemed to be out of the focus of ICCIC's attention since the new century began. When I saw the approaching 20th anniversary of Rewi Alley's death and tried to recall my experiences in the work related to Rewi Alley's legacy in China, I suddenly realised that my impressions about Shandan were quite out of date. “I must go and renew my knowledge about the situation of the school and the Gung Ho co-ops in the period of China's western development!”

Hence my seventh visit. This time I did not go with any assigned task, but as an individual tourist. No ceremony or formalities, just frank exchange of views and information. I was more than happy to have such a free come-and-go trip that I had never experienced before. I was fortunate to have good weather while I was there. Every day I woke up to see a blue sky. The forecasted sandstorm never came, just wind sweeping the dust along the road.

Downtown Shandan has taken a completely new look compared with the 1990s. Brand new buildings rose along the central intersection. Snack stands and rental billiard tables that used to crowd along the roadside have now disappeared. Replacing them are tidy restaurants and computer and mobile phone shops, photographic studios for weddings and small supermarkets with all kinds of daily necessities.

A six-lane avenue is under construction with coloured pavement and even a groove in the footpath to guide blind people [found in some larger Chinese cities], leading from the newly built South Lake Park in the south to the Yanzhi Mountain Highway in the north. The road looks so impressive, even a bit “luxurious” at the moment for a small county whose population is only some 50,000 in downtown—the other 150,000 being in the surrounding rural areas. I didn't see many cars on the road, but taxis have already started business on a private basis. Motorcycles rush through the streets at ease, apparently taking no notice to the traffic rules. A sort of 3-wheel mini-car called “bengbeng che” is most popular here. It cost me only two yuan for two kilometers from the SBS to the guesthouse where I stayed.

I spent a full day visiting the school campus accompanied by Headmaster Chen Xinlu. The newly constructed electronic education lab building is apparently what he is most proud of. This project received a contribution of 900,000 yuan RMB from the Rewi Alley Memorial Co-operative Foundation before it terminated its operation last December. Some teachers were busy installing and testing new computers when I dropped in. They want to get the school network system going and set up the SBS website as soon as possible.

Headmaster Chen told me that since the school was reorganized into a provincial middle-level key professional school in 1997, it has been developing very quickly and is now more flexible. They have combined middle with senior education, broadened its capacity for teaching and practice by establishing regular links with vocational schools and colleges in Tianjin, Qingdao and some commercial enterprises so that the SBS students can make use of their facilities to further their practice. They have also organized short-term training courses in various subjects for adults. The curriculum has been extended from focusing on agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry to multi-branches of learning, including electro-mechanics, communication, computer science, applied electro-technology, automobile maintenance, tourist English, hotel management, etc. All these measures have helped to promote the good reputation of the school in this region. Nearly 100% of the graduates have found jobs after graduation in the last few years.

The expansion of the school campus and updating of equipment are indeed remarkable. I am particularly impressed by the change of mentality of the girls, who used to be shy and ill at ease when meeting strangers. Now they look full of vigour and self-confidence, as keen as city girls in their pursuit of new emerging things. Though I didn't have time for face-to-face conversations with them, I distributed a questionnaire with the help of teachers to 12 students in different classes. The answers have shown that they are happy about having qualified teachers and good living facilities in the school. Some chose to study in SBS because of the school's special grants for children from poor families, its high employment rate after graduation, favorable conditions for studying English with NZ teachers and the possible opportunity of going abroad as exchange students. However, there were also answers that surprised me. The majority of students prefer getting a job in the city to working in Shandan after graduation. Some reasons given were that Shandan is "too windy and dusty", "shortage of water and pollution makes it unpleasant for me". This reminded me of the awkward situation that SBS faces: the failure to enroll any student for agriculture or forestry in the last two years, and the 1000 *mu* school farm has lain in waste for having no students to do practicing and no water for irrigating the field or the orchard. This situation really worried me.

I was delighted, however, to get a totally different answer from one girl who answered the questionnaire: "Should I make lots of money with the knowledge and skill I've learned, I would give my all to the poor regions, including my home village. I love planting trees, and I am willing to turn my native place into a sea of trees." What a comfort it would have been to Rewi Alley if he had heard these bold promises from a little Shandan girl! The values of young people are shaped primarily by the education they received and the influence of their social milieu. I am sure if the students are taught to understand what environmental conservation really mean to everyone on this globe today and what we can do to stop crazily consuming all the natural resources humans have to live on, they will no longer follow the "advice" that their future lies in the big cities and that there is nothing much to learn in agriculture and forestry. In fact, the SBS should take the lead in Shandan to publicize basic knowledge of environmental conservation and the necessity to strengthen the teaching of

agriculture and forestry.

To review the work of the Shandan Gung Ho experimental co-operative centre, I went to the office where Chen Zhinian, Director of the Shandan Federation of Gung Ho Co-operatives, briefed me on the latest developments in Shandan. In 2005, ICCIC launched a new training program with the support of CCA to help the seven existing experimental co-op enterprises regulate their management along the line of internationally acknowledged co-op values and principles. The training contributed to boosting the morale of these enterprises and to revitalize Gung Ho in Shandan, but there is still a long way to go before they can really put into effect the principles in the International Co-operative Identification Statement adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance at its 1997 conference. Unlike the Gung Ho call “work hard & work together”, each did “work hard” to keep itself going, but did not “work together” with the other co-ops. The discordance of institutional structure with regard to the relationship between the co-op enterprises and the federation remains a problem.

While the ICCIC training project was going on, the new emerging Farmers' Specialized Co-operative Economic Organizations (locally they call them Xiehui--association), made big strides and developed into a “trend of the times”. These farmers' organizations have several different forms, notably: Party branch + association + farmer household, distributor + association + farmer household, and company + association + farmer household. The county government issued a document to speed up their development and a model constitution to help regulate them and their operation. By the time I visited, many farmers' organizations had been set up based on such specific produce as oil seed, beer barley, potatoes, flax, fodder and seed plant, a total of 55 Xiehui's with 16,843 members. Although they are not genuine co-operatives, they do have some co-operative elements and could be transformed into co-operatives with appropriate direction.

To get some ideas of how they work, I asked to visit to the Weichi Flax Xiehui in Lubao Village, Weichi Township. It is one of the "Party branch + association + farmer household" type, organized with a six-member managing council and a four-member supervisory council, comprising Party secretaries, village head and farmers specialized in flax growing and marketing. This Xiehui was originally the Weichi Flax Co-operative under the Gung Ho Experimental Co-operative Centre, created with an ICCIC loan of 200,000 Yuan RMB. It suffered a fatal crisis in the early 1990s unable to compete in the market with similar flax factories in Gansu. It succeeded in overcoming the difficulty by introducing quality seed and starting to fabricate flooring from flax wastes. Village income began to grow again to reach 4 million yuan RMB last year with 1 million yuan profit. The farmers seemed happy about the transformation to a Xiehui. They believe it has played an increasingly important role in meeting their immediate needs, in protected their market interest and in giving a push to agricultural restructuring in the county.

With the rapid growth of the farmers' specialized economic co-operative organization, the Shandan Gung Ho Federation and the existing Gung Ho co-op enterprises are facing a severe challenge of “where to”. Should they keep a distance from the surging tide of Xiehui and go their own way as they did in the past, or should they find a way to introduce the ICIS co-op principles into the new farmers' organizations to create a new form of co-operative economy with “Chinese characteristics”? This is a question worthy of careful study for all Gung Ho workers and co-operative economists.

The day before I left, some friends took me for a stroll through the South Lake Park, where the rippling water and flickering weeping willows present a beautiful picture. The miniature models of the ancient Shandan City Wall and the Fa Ta Si Temple add some

classical flavour to the modern scene. Yet the children are most attracted by the colourful mandarin duck boats on the water. Of course they do not know that the South Lake was man-made from a natural pond where Rewi Alley used to teach swimming to students of the old SBS. They also wouldn't understand how much money and manpower it has cost to pump the scarce water up from underground and cover the lake bottom with plastic film to keep it from leaking. A sense of anxiety again rose in my mind: when these children reach my age 50 years from now, will this lake also have vanished into the desert like the pond and the Ruoshui River?

At the northern gate of the Park, I saw a flat square with an empty stone stand at the centre. Friends told me it is going to be named Rewi Alley Square and a marble statue of him will be erected there. I hope people will not only keep in mind his smiling face as a great friend of China from New Zealand, but will carry on conscientiously the rich legacy he contributed to Shandan and build up a prosperous life for all her people. Let the SBS continue to flourish based on Alley's educational ideas and goal! Let the Shandan Gung Ho revitalize itself by making a breakthrough in the new test! Let the treasures Alley donated in the Museum be better preserved and studied to add new attraction to a rejuvenated Shandan oasis on the ancient Silk Road!