

Hon Philip Burdon

Patron, New Zealand China Friendship Society

Chairman, Asia New Zealand Foundation

The New Zealand China Friendship Society's 60th Anniversary National Conference

19 May, 2012

As Patron of the New Zealand China Friendship Society, it is my pleasure to welcome today:

- His Excellency Mr Liao Hui, Vice-chairman of the national committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee, and President of the China-Oceania Friendship Association

- Mr Zhang Heqiang, Deputy Director-General, Department of American and Oceanian Affairs of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, and Secretary-General of China-Oceania Friendship Association.

It is my great pleasure to be addressing you today both as patron of the New Zealand China Friendship Society, and as chairman of the Asia New Zealand Foundation. This 60th anniversary conference is a tribute to the vision of the founders of the New Zealand China Friendship Society. Those pioneers laid the foundations of the strong relationship that New Zealand now enjoys with the People's Republic of China.

Today, few New Zealanders would question the need to have a friendly, trusting and productive relationship with China. But it was quite a different story in 1952, when the Cold War dominated New Zealand's view of the world. It was a brave and innovative move to establish the New Zealand China Friendship Society in such an environment, at odds with the dominant political viewpoint.

The society was well ahead of its time in recognising China's significance to New Zealand and the need to build understanding between our countries. History has vindicated its point of view.

In fact, if we look at the society's founding documents from 1952, its objectives remain highly relevant to New Zealand today. The society wanted:

- To promote peace and friendship with the people of China
- To develop cultural relations between the people of New Zealand and the people of China
- And to develop trade for mutual benefit

The society also pushed for diplomatic relations to be established between New Zealand and the newly formed People's Republic of China. It had to wait until 1972 for that goal to be realised. It is testament to the dedication and passion of the society's early members that it survived the 20 years between 1952 and 1972. For two decades, they represented New Zealand's only real contact with China.

Even after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972, the New Zealand China Friendship Society has continued to play a crucial role in building links between the two countries. Outside of state visits, countless members of this society have acted as unofficial ambassadors over the past decades.

I pay particular tribute here to the extraordinary contributions of my fellow Cantabrian and society life member Bill Willmott. Bill has served two five-year stints as national president of the society, has chaired numerous committees, and received multiple honours from both New Zealand and China. He has led 15 tours to China, some jointly with his wife Diana Madgin, who also deserves acknowledgement for her chairing of the He Ming Qing Trust.

I'd also like to acknowledge the contributions of other life members - Cecil Fowler, Nancy Goddard, Robin Brown, Mary Gray and Margaret Cooper – as well as current president Eric Livingstone, the rest of the national executive, and the 15 branches around the country.

In the work they and others do today, they have continued the legacy of this society's founders. It is not my place to delve too deeply into that work here, and I'm aware that others will more speak more knowledgeably about it over the course of today. For now, it's sufficient to say that the legacy of the remarkable Rewi Alley

endures today in the “Gung Ho” industrial co-operatives, and the Shandan Bailie School. Likewise, the nursing training scholarships that the society provides for Chinese from poor rural areas are a fitting tribute to the pioneering missionary nurse Kathleen Hall.

The society has also been doing vital work here in New Zealand to build understanding of China. In recent months, its 15 branches have been variously involved in organising film screenings, photography exhibitions, Mandarin and Cantonese language classes, English language corners, dumpling evenings, festivals and banquets. The society has always seen education as one of its key tasks, because it knows knowledge and understanding are the enemies of fear and prejudice. That need for education is greater than ever today, as the ties that bind New Zealand to the People’s Republic of China become more and more profound.

In the four decades since diplomatic relations were established, both countries have changed dramatically. One of the most obvious changes in New Zealand since 1972 is the demographic one. Since the late 1980s, more liberal immigration rules have brought new waves of Chinese immigrants to New Zealand, transforming our country.

The number of Chinese New Zealanders – both those born here and those born overseas - more than quadrupled between 1986 and 2001.

China is New Zealand’s largest source of international students. It is vital they have positive experiences while they are here, because they will go on to be excellent informal ambassadors for New Zealand and maintain lifelong connections to this country. The New Zealand China Friendship Society has been doing vital work in this area, offering cross-cultural advice to Chinese international students and their New Zealand hosts. An increasing number of these students are choosing to stay and work in New Zealand after graduation – and it is vital we make the most of the bridging skills they can offer both countries.

Chinese New Zealanders will play a key role in shaping this country’s future. Long gone are the days when local market gardeners were the only exposure many New Zealanders had to Chinese. Today, Chinese New Zealanders are represented in all walks of life.

As new immigrants have changed the face of this country, we have seen a revival of Chinese cultures and traditions here. As chairman of the Asia New Zealand Foundation, I have personally witnessed the tremendous growth in interest about Chinese culture amongst the wider New Zealand community. Many of you will have attended Auckland’s 13th Chinese Lantern Festival in February, which hundreds of thousands of Aucklanders enjoyed. Others will have been at the Christchurch Lantern Festival. Those are the two festivals that the Asia New Zealand Foundation is most intimately involved with, but we have also seen a proliferation of public Chinese New Year celebrations elsewhere in the country. The Chinese Culture Ministry has provided vital and active support for these festivals, along with other city and provincial governments in China, for which we are most grateful.

Of course, the signing of the high-profile Free Trade Agreement in 2008 has helped bring China to the forefront of New Zealanders’ minds. When I spoke at Parliament four years ago to mark the signing of that agreement, I remarked that we had known China was going to play a big role in our future - but few would have expected it to happen so quickly.

The developments since then have been staggering. The links between our two countries are growing and the nature of those connections is becoming more diverse. If we talk purely in economic terms, in the last couple of years China has overtaken the United States to become New Zealand’s second largest trading partner. If current patterns continue, it may overtake Australia too in a matter of years. Last year, spending by Chinese tourists to New Zealand exceeded spending by American tourists for the first time.

No longer does China seem far away or mysterious to New Zealanders. A growing number of Kiwis are choosing it as a work, study or holiday destination. Open any major New Zealand newspaper on any given day, and the odds are you’ll see a story about China in there somewhere. And while we have seen emotive rhetoric recently around Shanghai Pengxin’s bid for the Crafar dairy farms, it is just as common to see a news item celebrating the ever-diversifying trade links with China.

As a result of our growing ties, we have seen an increasing number of official visits between the two countries. But beyond the state level, countless other short and long-term people exchanges have served to remind us

that there is more to the relationship than trade. As patron of this society - and as chairman of the Asia New Zealand Foundation - I am extremely conscious that for New Zealand to be perceived as a valued friend of China, our links and relationships must go beyond trade through to close links between people.

Both the New Zealand China Friendship Society and the Asia New Zealand Foundation have been doing critical work in this respect.

I'd like to share with you now some of the work the foundation has been doing. The foundation's programmes take a long-term approach, targeting Kiwis of all ages and stages. For instance, next month we are sending a group of secondary school business studies teachers on a study trip to Shanghai, to deepen their knowledge of trade connections, so they can pass those learnings on to their pupils. This is just one of the professional development opportunities in China that we support. The foundation also sends at least three New Zealand journalists to Chinese media organisations each year on exchange, while New Zealand business graduates have been undertaking internships at Fonterra in Shanghai. We support artist residency exchanges to China and provide Mandarin language scholarships, in partnership with the Confucius Institute.

Finally, I would like to talk about one of Asia New Zealand Foundation's flagship programmes – the Young Leaders Network. The network brings together talented young people who are forging New Zealand's future relations with Asia. Its members are based in New Zealand, Asia, and further afield. Some of you will know young leader Luke Qin, who is also a member of the New Zealand China Friendship Society's Wellington branch. Other young leaders have a relationship with the society through activities such as the Mandarin corners.

Meanwhile, young leaders based in China include entrepreneurs, teachers, investment managers, business analysts, IT experts, documentary makers, and Mandarin students. These are young New Zealanders who have recognised China's significance to this country and chosen it as the destination for their big OE.

In the coming decades, bright young New Zealanders working and studying in China - and bright young Chinese with a connection to New Zealand - will play a vital role in building understanding and enduring friendships between our two countries.

What might the future relationship between our countries look like? It is not easy for a tiny country like New Zealand to engage effectively with a mighty civilisation like China. Unlike 1952, the task is no longer up to just a handful of courageous and dedicated individuals.

It will take widespread "China literacy" to ensure New Zealand continues to make the most of the friendship we enjoy with the People's Republic of China today. The New Zealand China Friendship Society has an important role to play in that by continuing to provide the visionary leadership it has shown in the past 60 years.

I would like to think that all young New Zealanders are given the opportunity to learn about Chinese society, culture, history and language in our education system. Nobody can argue with the fact that China is enormously important to this country, economically, socially and demographically – but does our education system reflect that? I suspect not.

The Confucius Institute and other bodies have done much to promote the study of Chinese languages and cultures but this work is far from finished. I would like to think that we will reach the point where learning Mandarin no longer feels like an insurmountable task – where the number of New Zealand secondary pupils studying Mandarin is no longer dwarfed by the number studying European languages.

Sixty years on from the establishment of this society, and 40 years on since the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, New Zealand is proud of being the first Western economy to have a free trade agreement in place. It is still the only one, but that won't always be the case. We cannot expect to keep our edge if we are complacent about the knowledge and understanding New Zealand needs to have in order to be a valued and equal friend to China. In continuing to push for cultural understanding, the New Zealand China Friendship Society can help ensure we do not take our friendship with China for granted.

Thank you.