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CONTENTS

1 A Common People's Literature: Popular Fiction and Social Change in Republican Shanghai
   Ng Mausang (with an accompanying essay by Geremie R. Barme and a short translation by Jonathan Hutt)

23 Seven Dialogues from the Zhuangzi
   Jean François Billeter—translated by Mark Elvin

47 The Thin Horses of Yangzhou
   Wei Minghua—translated and introduced by Antonia Finnane

67 Ku Hung-ming: Homecoming (2)
   Lo Hui-min

97 West Meets East: Rewi Alley and Changing Attitudes towards Homosexuality in China
   Anne-Marie Brady

121 Liberation and Light: the Language of Opposition in Imperial Japan
   Vera Mackie
Cover calligraphy  Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover picture  From the photograph-album of Rewi Alley: “After tiffin, Henli, August 1930,” Kathleen Wright Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand
WEST MEETS EAST: REWI ALLEY AND CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY IN CHINA

Anne-Marie Brady

Introduction

The homosexual tradition in China is long and rich. This tradition had a significant impact on Chinese politics, literature, theatre, and many other areas of Chinese life. It was a tradition markedly different from historical attitudes in Western society, which were based on the Judaeo-Christian viewpoint. While this tradition was condemned by many Western commentators on China, most prominently the missionaries, for some foreigners living in or visiting China, tolerance for sexual ambiguity was part of the appeal that China had for them. However, since 1949, in an ironic reversal, while Stonewall! and the birth of the gay civil rights movement has made a significant impact on attitudes in the Western world, China, as part of the process of ‘modernization’, has chosen to abandon traditional attitudes for the historical Western view of homosexuality as a perversion.

Under the forty-year rule of the Communist government, social acceptance

1 On the night of 27 June 1969 a gay bar in New York city, the Stonewall Inn, was raided by police, sparking off a series of riots. Since then, “Stonewall” has come to be seen as the starting point of the gay rights movement. Stuart Timmons writes that Stonewall “tended to eclipse all previous gay activism. It marked a new public consciousness about gay people and has been annually commemorated as the anniversary of the gay movement.” Timmons, The trouble with Harry Hay, founder of the modern gay movement (Boston, Mass.: Alyson Publications, 1990), p.228. See also Margaret Cruikshank, The gay and lesbian liberation movement (New York: Routledge, 1992); John D’Emilio, Sexual politics, sexual communities: the making of a homosexual minority in the United States of America (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1983); idem, Making trouble: essays on gay history, politics, and the university (London: Routledge, 1992).
The focus of this study is the change in attitudes towards sexuality on the Chinese mainland, hence my emphasis on Communist rule. However, it would be wrong to assume that the situation in Taiwan or Hong Kong is much different: in both places traditional Chinese attitudes towards sexuality have for the most part been replaced by Western-influenced puritanism.

of homosexuality has virtually disappeared. A 1993 article in the *Beijing Review* describes current Chinese attitudes: "In China, from the view of public morals, homosexuality is synonymous with filth, ugliness and metamorphosis." Sexuality and attitudes towards it are an intimate, and hence, central, aspect of any society. This paper discusses the change in Chinese attitudes towards male homosexuality from the Republican era (1911–49) to the Communist era (1949– ). It focuses on the experiences of gay Western men who lived in or visited China in the Republican era, in particular, the experiences of a New Zealander, Rewi Alley (1897–1987), whose sixty years in China spanned this time. Alley was a prominent figure in both Republican and Communist China. In the Republican era, he became best known for his humanitarian work in Shanghai’s factories and for his role as a figurehead of the Chinese Industrial Co-operatives. From 1945 to 1952 he was Headmaster at the Shandan Bailie School, set up to train workers for the co-operative movement. Under the Communists, Alley continued his public role as an official Friend of China, responsible for promoting New China to the Western world. However, in this paper, it is more private aspects of his career which we will consider, that is, Alley’s lifestyle and sexuality under the changing circumstances of Chinese society.

**Figure 2**

"Weiling, June 1930" (*Kathleen Wright Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library* [henceforth ‘ATLY’, p.54). This photograph, together with many others in this article, is reproduced courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. It comes from a large album compiled by Rewi Alley which is held in the Kathleen Wright Collection. Kathleen was one of Alley’s younger sisters, to whom he gave the album for safe-keeping.

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2 The focus of this study is the change in attitudes towards sexuality on the Chinese mainland, hence my emphasis on Communist rule. However, it would be wrong to assume that the situation in Taiwan or Hong Kong is much different: in both places traditional Chinese attitudes towards sexuality have for the most part been replaced by Western-influenced puritanism.


4 Alley, although of European descent, was named after the rebel Maori chief Rewi Maniapoto by his liberal-minded father, Frederick Alley. The correct Maori pronunciation is “Ray-wi”; however, New Zealanders are notorious for mispronouncing Maori names, and people of Rewi Alley’s generation call him “Roo-ee”, while later generations have adopted the aberrant “Ree-wi.”

5 Shandan 丹丹 was formerly romanized as “Sandan” prior to the introduction of the *pinyin* system in China.
A New Zealand Childhood

Rewi Alley was born in Springfield, New Zealand, in 1897, a middle child of six. His mother, Clara Buckingham Alley, was one of New Zealand’s early suffragettes who helped gain the vote for women in 1893, while his father, Frederick Alley, a school teacher, was well-known for his progressive views on education. However, despite his progressive educational views, Alley senior did not hold progressive views about sexuality. New Zealand society was extremely conservative; indeed, until 1987 homosexuality was a criminal offence, and hence, a covert activity. Rewi Alley’s early years reflect the conservative values of that society; his upbringing was a mixture of repression and illicit liberation. Frederick Alley was extremely puritanical. He had an obsessive fear of anything that could be perceived as sexual behaviour and kept a close watch on the young Rewi and his elder brother Eric. The two boys were frequently beaten and locked in the tool shed for any behaviour perceived as ‘abnormal’. In her memoirs Sunshine and Shadow, Alley’s elder sister Gwen recalled that she used to ‘dress Rewi up in a little red smock and call him my little sister ‘Rosie’. Dad objected, especially because Rewi said he was going to grow up to be a lady since they were nicer than men.”

Still, at the same time, it is only fair to mention Gwen’s comment that “Rewi was always playing houses with Nora (a local girl), and had arranged to marry her when they grew up.” Although he preferred men and was described by some as a mysogynist, Alley was attractive to women. He had a charismatic presence that appealed to both sexes.

Clara Alley had to make sure that the children were always fully clothed in their father’s presence, though she allowed them to enjoy the freedom of nude swimming when he wasn’t around. As a result, Alley became almost obsessive about emphasising the joys of nudity, mentioning it in letters, poems, stories, and frequently in conversation. As in his childhood, it was one of the few ways in which he could express pleasure in the physical. Alley was especially close to his mother, and wrote: “She was a part of me. I would have told her anything she asked, which she did not. I just did not tell anyone of all the things I learned from village boys.”

Exactly what it was that Alley learnt from village boys he also neglects to tell his readers. His reluctance to be more specific typifies the writings of gay men from his era and the problems the researcher faces in studying them. Since homosexuality has for so long been forbidden in Western society, homosexual writing in the

Rewi Alley, letter to Pip Alley, 1 April 1972. Alley papers, ATL. Gwen seems to have been particularly obsessed with the subject of her brother’s sexuality. She devoted nearly half of her book *Sunshine and shadows*, ostensibly a history of the Playcentre movement in New Zealand, to an account of Rewi’s childhood, with a strong emphasis on his early expressions of sexuality.

Figure 4

*Wong Tong Kwa looking like a sprite, 28/8/29*  
(Kathleen Wright Collection, ATL, p.128)

West is frequently cloaked in nuance and coded images, its true meaning available only, as Robert Aldrich describes, to the “initiated or the interested.”

All his life Alley managed to keep his sexuality a secret from his family in New Zealand, who speculated amongst themselves as to why he remained single. During the Cultural Revolution both his sister Gwen and his brother Pip wrote inquiring whether he was physically able to have sexual relationships (thinking he might have some old war wound). To this Alley replied: “You could not possibly understand, so please do not labour the subject and do not talk nonsense about my being unfit ... forget it. Not a subject to be shouted from the housetops either.”

As a public figure, Alley was always careful to present a sanitized version of his life to the outside world. The Alley family atmosphere was not conducive to openness about sexuality. Moreover, as a gay man living in an era when homosexuality was a punishable offence, Alley was forced from an early age to play out a role in order to disguise his sexual orientation. His ability to play-act and suppress his natural inclinations would stand him in good stead.

**The Chinese Labour Corps**

In 1917 Alley joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force to fight in the Somme. Typical of the young men of his day he left New Zealand with a sense of fatalism about his future: sixty years later he wrote: “One would go and get killed, and that was that.” It was while fighting in France that China first made an impact on his life. By chance, he met and spent the night with some men from Shandong Province, who were part of the Chinese Labour Corps. Later, during the German advance of March 1918, the New Zealand forces fought alongside the Chinese. Alley’s experiences with these men had a profound effect on him, revealing a different perspective of sexuality and, ultimately, inspiring a rebellion against his puritanical upbringing. Alley wrote of this meeting: “It was the first time ... that I had any inkling of what China meant.” This is his description of his first encounter:

I was with a friend, out for adventure one evening, just two New Zealander common infantrymen in their late teens. We met two tall men, dressed in blue and with fur hats. They smiled, we smiled, and we went together into a wine shop and had crusty French bread and red wine, talking in snatches of broken French. Then came a struggle as both sides insisted on paying. They were the first Chinese in our lives that we had been able to meet on the level ground of mutual respect.
It should come as no surprise that Alley’s narration makes no mention of sex. Alley never publicly admitted his sexuality, he was a very private person who had few confidants in life, but he often talked with his close friend Courtney Archer about the Chinese Labour Corps. Archer, also a gay New Zealander, worked for six years as the accountant at the Shandan Bailie School and afterwards maintained a correspondance with Alley. According to Archer, “Alley was of the generation that didn’t talk about sex but would sometimes drop hints.” From these “hints” Archer gathered that the evening spent with the men from Shandong was Alley’s first significant sexual experience. This encounter certainly made a lasting impression and, as he implies in his memoirs, served as his inspiration for going to China in 1927.

The differences in attitudes between the West and China which made such an impression on the young Rewi Alley have a long history. Bret Hinsch in Passions of the Cut Sleeve writes that the historical tradition of China includes an acceptance of homosexuality “that dates back to at least the Bronze Age.” According to Hinsch,

The long duration of tolerance allowed the accumulation of a literature and sense of history that in turn enabled those with strong homosexual desires to arrive at a complex self-understanding. In many periods homosexuality was widely accepted and even respected, had its own formal history, and had a role in shaping Chinese political institutions, modifying social conventions, and spurring artistic creation. A sense of tradition lasted up until this century, when it fell victim to a growing sexual conservatism and the Westernisation of morality.

The Chinese attitude towards homosexuality was distinctly different from Western mores. Hinsch describes the Chinese perspective in terms of “tendencies,” “actions” and “preferences,” rather than sexual identity, as in the West, where the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual is absolute. In the words of Robert Aldrich, “Western society has for centuries been uncomgenial to homosexuality, law considered homosexuality a crime, medicine labelled it a disease, religion called it a sin, psychology analysed it as a perversion or personality disorder and general social mores castigated it as a disgusting deviance.” In China, same-sex love was accepted as a natural expression of human sexuality, and homoerotic as well as homosocial (same-sex non-sexual intimacy such as hand-holding, sleeping in the same bed) behaviour was common. Courtney Archer writes: “the classical Chinese had no medical or scientific term comparable to ‘homosexuality’ but used metaphors instead … . Because homosexuality was so widespread in Chinese society and in all classes there was little need for a special term.” This alternative understanding of the realms of human sexuality was a revelation to Alley and other foreigners who came in contact with China in the pre-modern era, and they benefited from its ambiguity.

In addition to sexual tolerance, for many gay men there was a further
In modern times with a more public gay culture in the Western world, this fascination for the Asian male is represented by the existence of Longyang Societies in many Western cities, set up exclusively for Western gays who appreciate Asians. The society is named after Lord Longyang, the favourite of a king in the Zhou dynasty. ‘Longyang’ was one of the metaphors for homosexuality in pre-modern China.

To some foreign observers the sexual opacity of Chinese society was a reason to despise the Chinese as an immoral and decadent race. The comments of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, describing what he saw on the streets of Peking, exemplify this attitude: “There are public streets full of boys got up like prostitutes. And there are people who buy these boys and teach them to play music, sing and dance. And then, gallantly dressed and made up with rouge like women these miserable men are initiated into this terrible vice.” Yet there were a number of less vocal but equally prominent foreigners, exiles from Western puritanism, who chose to live in China at least partly because of the acceptance of their own sexuality that they found there. Rewi Alley was one of these.

After World War I Alley returned to New Zealand and ran a sheep farm with an ex-schoolmate for six years. The work was hard and unrewarding. Alley felt isolated and lonely, living with a partner whom others describe as “sex mad,” who spent his spare time gazing at the neighbouring female through a pair of binoculars. Little remains from this time in Alley’s life, save a few photographs and a copy of a biography of Saint Teresa. Alexander Whyte’s introduction to this book might be said to have presaged Alley’s future direction in life: “Those who would be like Saint Teresa today would become missionaries or labour amongst the poor.” In 1926, Alley walked off his land with a plan to make his way to China. He told his sister Gwen he was going to join the war then raging there. He told her that war was “the only thing I know anything about, and I guess I can help a bit.”

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**Figure 5**

*Alley roadmaking at Moawataia, New Zealand, 1923, work he engaged in to supplement his income as a farmer (Willis Airey, A learner in China [Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1970]*)
Homosexuality in Republican China

China in the 1920s was a society in chaos. Nominally ruled by the Nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai-shek, it was a battleground for power-hungry warlords and prey to an ever-encroaching foreign presence. Alley arrived in Shanghai in April 1927, during the ‘White Terror’—the massacre by Chiang Kai-shek’s forces of tens of thousands of Communist supporters in the city. It was a year when foreigners were being made to feel unwelcome in China by the more radical of the Nationalists, and April 1927 was particularly significant in that it marked the end of the first United Front between Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist party. Yet Shanghai was still an exhilarating place for a young colonial with imperialist leanings. It was, after all, the Pearl of the Orient, the Paris of the East, and last but not least, a Paradise for Adventurers. Shanghai was a city of great contrasts, a haven for the very rich and a hell-hole for the poor.

The Republican period marks the twilight years of the history of sexual tolerance in China. The new generation of Chinese thinkers who sought to reform and modernize China saw the traditional tolerance of homosexuality as a symbol of the decadence of the old order which they were determined to destroy. However, the upheaval of the Chinese civil war postponed the implementation of these views. In the 1920s and 1930s Shanghai was known as a city where you could do anything if you had money. As Christopher Isherwood wrote:

27 See Gail Hershatter, “Modernizing sex: sexing modernity: prostitution in early twentieth-century Shanghai” (pp.147–74), and Christina K. Gilmartin, “Gender, political culture, and women’s mobilization in the Chinese nationalist revolution, 1924–1927” (pp.195–225), in Engendering China: women, culture and the state, ed. Christina Gilmartin et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), for an interesting discussion of Republican-era morality and its political overtones. See also Frank Dickens’s Sex, culture and modernity in China (London: Hurst & Co., 1995) for an analysis of the process of the change in sexual mores in China from the late Qing to the present day.

Figure 6

“Vincent ‘siesta’ couch, Shanghai” (Kathleen Wright Collection, ATL, p.148). Vincent was a close friend of Alley’s in the late 1920s, Like Alley, he was an officer in the Fire Station of the International Settlement in Shanghai.

Archer, letter.


Shanghai was a city with an active homosexual scene. Male prostitutes were available in the bars and brothels, and in bathhouses where erotic massage was an optional extra. However it would be a mistake to view this as something separate from the heterosexual sex scene; homosexual activity was simply another option for the sex consumer. In the dance halls and night-clubs where partners could be hired to dance, both female and transsexual dancers were available. Courtney Archer writes of this era:

> Men, and I am not going to call them “gay,” would find their pleasures in a personal way with say students, soldiers, actors and servants as would the few Europeans. Because there was no stigma attached there was no need for gay clubs as known in the Western world . . . . As a last resort there were male prostitutes and male brothels in the larger towns. On many occasions in Shanghai when accosted by pimps offering “nice girls” a refusal always brought forth an offer of a “nice boy.” This often at 2 p.m. in the middle of a Shanghai summer when one was on the way home for lunch.

Nevertheless, for some travellers to China in this era, sexual tourism was one of the highlights of a visit to Shanghai. Playwright Noel Coward and his companion Jeffrey Amherst, while staying in Shanghai, were taken by “some charming new friends . . . three English naval officers, Acherson, Bushell and Guerrier, with whom we visited many of the lower and gayer haunts of the city . . . .” What these “gayer” haunts might contain is described in fascinating detail in Henry Champly’s *The Road to Shanghai: White Slave Traffic in Asia*. While Champly’s primary concern is his objection to white prostitutes sleeping with Asian men, he describes an encounter with a White Russian transsexual in a Shanghai night-club:

> At the “Monica” we were embraced and pawned over by a very pretty Russian blonde, rather plump and pitted, but elegant, scented, eminently desirable. “That’s Schirra. Do you like her?” Katia asked me insidiously. “I should say so! . . . .” They all laughed at my simple-mindedness. “Shirra is a man. His name is Gerald. He does take you in, doesn’t he? He’s getting a bit fat now, too. If you had seen him when he first arrived from Harbin . . . .” “From Harbin—he too?” “And not a single ‘Taxi girl’ had anything like his success when he was dancing at the ‘Sun-Sun’ and elsewhere . . . .” “Really?” said I. “Even with the Chinese?” “The Chinese are very fond of men disguised as women.”
Christopher Isherwood and W. H. Auden made a point of sampling the delights of the bathhouse scene when they visited Shanghai in 1937, although they omitted to mention this in their travel book of the time, *Journey to a War*. In the 1930s, even openly homosexual writers such as Auden and Isherwood felt it necessary to be discreet about their sexual preferences—in print at least. Isherwood later described the two writers' sexual exploits in his autobiography, *Christopher and his Kind*.

Toward the end of their visit, Wystan and Christopher began taking afternoon holidays from their social consciences in a bathhouse where you were erotically soaped and massaged by young men. You could pick your attendants, and many of them were beautiful. Those who were temporarily disengaged would watch the action, with giggles, through peepholes in the walls of the bathrooms. What made the experience pleasingly exotic was that tea was served to the customer throughout; even in the midst of an embrace, the attendant would disengage one hand, pour a cupful, and raise it tenderly but firmly, to the customer's lips. If you refused the tea at first, the attendant went on offering it until you accepted. It was like a sex fantasy in which a naked nurse makes love to the patient but still insists on giving him his medicine punctually, at the required intervals.22

There was a distinctly different community of foreigners in Peking. Peking was renowned, not for decadence, but rather as a cultural centre, and accordingly it attracted gay men whose primary interest was Chinese culture. In contrast to adventurers like Alley and sexual tourists such as Auden and Isherwood were a separate group of foreign homosexuals whom the writer Harold Acton defined as “aesthetes.”23 The aesthetes were an élite group of cultured and educated Westerners. Not all aesthetes were necessarily gay, but most were. For these men interest in Chinese culture and homosexuality coincided. David Kidd, who lived in Peking in the late 1940s, says that "Being gay was secondary. It was the lifestyle and the culture which attracted."24 George Kates, curator of Oriental Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, who lived in Peking for seven years, wrote of his favourite city:

Peking, in the gentleness of manner of its inhabitants, in their courtesy and good humour, had become for those lucky enough to have found it a sunlit haven difficult to describe, superb for the enjoyment of the mere sweetness of existence, unlike anything they had ever known before or—of course—have ever been able to find since.25

The aesthetes amused themselves in appreciating the Chinese arts. They moved in separate circles from the other main groups of foreigners living in Peking at that time—diplomats and missionaries—forming salons of like-minded friends.26 According to Alastair Morrison, who lived in Peking during the 1940s, the attitude of other foreigners was tolerant, “although one wouldn’t necessarily invite them to dinner.”27 Sinologist C. P. Fitzgerald gave a less generous account in his book *Why China?*

They floated, as it were, halfway between the culture of the West and the civilization of China. They had often virtually withdrawn from active participation
Rewi Alley and Shanghai

In the liberal climate of Shanghai in the late 1920s, Alley was able to explore his sexuality truly for the first time. Not long after his arrival in China Alley met Alec Camplin, an English engineer who was to be an important influence during the next ten years. The New Zealand writer James Bertram gave a portrait of Camplin in his book Shadow of a War.

But what might have been regarded by hostile Westerners as a foreign ‘gay scene’ was viewed quite differently by most Chinese. Courtney Archer writes that to the Chinese, sexual preferences were a private matter, and “homo-sexuality ... was widespread and of no concern to society as a whole. As a result there was no ‘gay scene’ as such ... .” Archer, letter.

Kidd, interview.

Rewi Alley’s ‘partner’ of eight years, the English engineer Alec Camplin

Figure 7

“Alec Camplin at Henli” (Kathleen Wright Collection, ATL, p.148).

Rewi Alley’s ‘partner’ of eight years, the English engineer Alec Camplin in their own culture, largely because they found some aspects of it very little to their own taste ... . They were cultured, but unproductive, and mainly un-creative also ... . They knew much about Chinese civilization, they studied it with love and learning, but they did not succeed in interpreting it to the world at large. The New Zealand writer James Bertram gave a portrait of Camplin in his book Shadow of a War.
Camplin was an old partner of Rewi Alley's, and an “original” of the type that is really only happy in places like China. Working as an engineer in the American-owned power plant in Shanghai, he had acquired an amazing collection of University degrees, chiefly by correspondence. He and Alley when they first lived together had one of the best libraries in Shanghai, and both had adopted and educated Chinese youngsters whose parents had become famine victims. Alec’s yarns of these days were first-rate entertainment, and sometimes had a pleasant touch of the fantastic.41

From 1930 to 1938 the two men shared a house together in the International Settlement. Camplin and Alley had much in common. They were very close

friends, though they may not have been lovers. Both were primarily attracted to Chinese men. They shared a love of learning and, unusual amongst the Shanghai community of foreigners, a deep interest in Asian culture. Both had a rather earthy sense of humour that was the mark of an inherent disregard for authority and pomp. Neither was interested in fitting into the British élite which dominated Shanghai society. In contrast to the hedonistic, materialistic pleasures which prevailed amongst this élite, Alley and Camplin spent their spare time exploring the countryside around Shanghai in the company of young Chinese male friends. They made frequent trips to the island of Choshan, site of a Buddhist monastery, where, Alley told Courtney Archer, “the young monks couldn’t keep their hands to themselves.”

42 Archer, interview. What Alley calls “Choshan” is perhaps Zhoushan island, a few hours by boat from Shanghai.

43 Hinsch, Passions, p.31.

Patronage of young men by older homosexuals is a common theme of homosexual life in many cultures. In China, the traditional pattern of patronage in homosexual activity encompassed the adoption of favoured young men. Bret Hinsch writes: “The creation of fictitious kinship ties was used as a means of organising homosexual relations. The word used to describe such relations is qi 契, which has implications of contractuality, deep friendship and adoption.”

The adoption of young boys by Alley and Camplin is part of this pattern, as it is part of a universal pattern, the desire for family. Throughout his life in China Alley surrounded himself with young Chinese men, often referred to by others as “Rewi’s boys.” Alley was a man with a deep need for and love of family. He craved the acceptance and understanding that only family members can give. Yet he had both physically and
emotionally distanced himself from his New Zealand family. His fear of revealing his sexuality to them meant that he could never find the closeness he sought. Instead he created a Chinese ‘family’ where he found love and acceptance of who he was.\(^{44}\)

Despite his original plan to fight as a mercenary in the civil war, not long after his arrival in Shanghai Alley took up work as an officer in the Municipal Fire Brigade. Foreign life in China in the late 1920s, even for a lowly fire officer of the International Settlement, was typified by decadence and privilege. It was a far cry from Alley’s hard years in the back-blocks of New Zealand. Alley made much of his glamorous lifestyle in letters home. As the family under-achiever, he seems to have felt the need to prove that after years of failure he was now moving on to greater things. The Fire Brigade were famous for fighting in coats and tails, since they were frequently called out while attending evening functions. Alley wrote:

\(^{44}\) In a 1940 diary Alley described his family as his adopted sons Alan and Mike, Alec Camplin, K. P. Liu, Frank Lem, Ralph Lapwood, Ed and Peg Snow, Song Qingling, and Grace and Manny Granich. See Alley, At 90, pp.78–9.
We have had very few [fires] lately. The only notable ones being a few in the bunkers of the “Sui Wo,” in which I ruined a perfectly good silk shirt, and a block of thirteen Chinese houses and shops which made quite a big blaze. We had to work hard to keep it at that. It is good fun when one learns not to worry about the destitute refugees. They soon get dug in elsewhere anyway.\textsuperscript{45}

In this letter Alley displays the typically callous attitudes of the Shanghailanders; the European residents in the days of the International Settlement. These attitudes took some time to undo. When he first arrived, Alley took a dislike to the Chinese. His admiration was for the orderly and well-organized Japanese. Initially he considered moving on to work in Japan followed by further world travel.\textsuperscript{46} After a holiday in Korea Alley wrote, “This Japanese dictatorship is the best thing that has happened in Korea. She is dragging the people up to a decent standard of living.”\textsuperscript{47} Alley’s political development was slow. In 1929 he described himself as an “Internationalist,” though not in the Communist sense of the word.\textsuperscript{48} In a 1930 letter, Alley is critical of “Red” students planted at Chinese universities to “ferment trouble” (sic) and is disparaging of “ridiculous” Nationalist slogans which say “Down with Imperialism” and “Abolish the unequal treaties.”\textsuperscript{49}

It is unquestionable, however, that at some stage in his first ten years in China, Alley decided to make his life there and began to take an active interest in the fate of his adopted country. Shanghai in the twenties and thirties was chaotic and corrupt, and not even the most privileged of Shanghailanders could ignore the daily suffering of the Chinese. In addition to fire-fighting, Alley’s responsibilities in the Fire Brigade included inspection of the thousands of unsanitary and dangerous sweatshops in the International Settlement. More than anything else this was to inspire his urge to work to improve the lives of ordinary Chinese people. Alley’s factory inspection work gradually politicized him. Alley became friends with Madame Song Qingling, widow of Sun Yatsen and the only left-leaning member of the famous Song family. In 1934 Alley and Alec Camplin joined the first foreigners’ Marxist-Leninist study group in Shanghai. From this time onwards, through his friendship with Madame Song, Alley became involved in the Shanghai Communist underground, among other things providing a refuge for fugitive Communists and housing an illegal radio transmitter.

Alley’s commitment to living in China was deepened by a sense of alienation from his native land. On his first return home in 1932 his adopted son Alan was abused by racist New Zealanders. Friends from his farming days refused to meet with him because he was travelling with a Chinese
citizen. Expatriation or exile from one's homeland is a common thread in the lives of gays and lesbians from societies where homosexuality is not tolerated; expatriation enables the traveller to be released from social constraints and physiological inhibitions, from scandal or persecution at home. The traveller is an outsider, free in a foreign society to be whatever he wishes to be. A stranger in a strange land, he is free to recreate his persona at will. In China, Alley was able to explore a side of himself that would have been forbidden in his native New Zealand. Moreover, China's chronic political troubles allowed the expression of a latent desire for missionary-type work which had been apparent from his early youth.

The Chinese Industrial Co-operative Movement

In 1937 the Japanese invasion of China brought about a dramatic change in Alley's life. Following the bombing of Shanghai which destroyed many of the factories he was paid to inspect, Alley was one of a group of Chinese and foreigners who proposed the setting up of the Chinese Industrial Co-operative Movement (CIC). The aim of the CIC was to provide a livelihood for the thousands of Chinese refugees who streamed into the hinterlands away from the Japanese attacks, and to maintain China's manufacturing industries as a counter to the Japanese products that were flooding the market and funding the enemy war machine. Alley was nominated as a symbolic leader of the co-operative movement and became the focus of an active publicity campaign that, over the fifteen years of the movement's existence, helped to raise millions of dollars (US). He gave up his luxurious lifestyle in Shanghai for the difficult and precarious work of promoting the movement to refugees in the Chinese interior. It was a very lonely existence. Alec and Rewi differed on their views of the future of China. Camplin left Shanghai in 1938 to return to his native England (where he died in 1939), while Alley's two adopted sons elected to join the Communist forces in Yan'an.

Rewi's School

In 1945 Alley gave up his organising work for the CIC to concentrate his energies on a new project, the Bailie School. The School was first set up in Shuangshipu, Shanxi province, then moved to Shandan, a remote and barren corner in Gansu province in China's North-West, to escape Japanese bombing. Alley took on a new role as Headmaster at the school after the original Headmaster, George Hogg, died of tetanus while Alley was visiting. The school was established to train boys aged twelve to eighteen to be workers in the co-operative movement.
Although a number of other Bailie schools were set up elsewhere, the Shandan school was the most famous and most successful, undoubtedly as a result of Alley’s leadership. Alley continued to make use of the publicity the co-operative movement attracted to garner money for his pet project. New Zealand became one of the main sources of funding for the school, which newspapers there insisted on calling “Rewi’s School.” As a result of his efficient fund-raising methods and the publicity he drew, Alley was able to attract a group of skilled foreign and Chinese teachers and technicians to what was an otherwise underdeveloped and inhospitable outpost on the Old Silk Road.

As it was throughout most of Chinese society at this time, homosexual activity was accepted at the school. According to Courtney Archer:

> From comments that they made it was quite common for boys to sleep together . . . Saturday night was sauna night. It became a great social occasion when sleeping partners would be chosen . . . . All the pretty young boys at the school were spoken for by the older boys at the school. Nobody thought anything of Rewi sleeping with the boys. It just happened. It was very innocent. Very matter of fact. Rewi used to joke about how all the pretty boys of the school were spoken for: “There goes so and so with his pretty legs . . . .” For most of the students the [sexual] experiences were ephemeral and didn’t really affect their later lives. They all went off and married and had kids and so on. I don’t think there was the same black and white attitude which seems to apply in Western societies—I mean either you are or you aren’t.52
Archer first found out Alley was gay when some of the other students told him Alley had slept with them. When Archer and Alley were alone, Alley felt free to be more uninhibited: “for example the boys' shorts would get shorter and shorter, with holes etc., the boys would come in to see Alley [while Archer was there] and he would put his hand on their thighs and up their trousers.” Here it is important to define the terms “boys” and “students”: Archer and other foreign workers in the CIC whom I interviewed always referred to the students of the Bailie School as “boys” regardless of their age; “students” included those who had graduated from the school and had taken up teaching positions. Alley was not a paedophile: his preferences were for young Chinese men in their late teens and early twenties who had passed the age of consent. Alley was both father and mother to the boys of the school; it would be a gross exaggeration to assume that his interactions with all Chinese males were characterized by homoerotic love. He had a genuine commitment to bettering the lot of the Chinese people, particularly the youth, whom he saw as the hope of the nation. But it is undeniable that Alley had sexual relations with some of his students, and while this is anathema to contemporary Western mores as an abuse of a fiduciary relationship, in the social climate of China in those times it was not at all unusual. According to Courtney Archer: “Homosexuality in China was a mixture of ‘agape’ and ‘eros’, hence the use of the word ‘favourite’ which had overtones of both. Certainly this was the situation as far as Rewi was concerned—there was a deep bond of affection between him and the students which was life-long even if many of them had just slept in his bed or taken things further.”

Alley was not the only member of the foreign staff to be having such affairs. The heterosexual foreigners at the school turned a blind eye. According to Archer, “During those years at the school I am sure most of the European staff were aware of the situation as far as Rewi's sexual orientation was concerned. I think the fact attracted a number of Europeans to come and work at the school. Of those who weren't homosexual, one was ex-public school and familiar with homosexuality. It was a subject never talked about, although Rewi would refer to it in a very oblique way from time to time. But it was there. It was accepted.”

Alley's sexual preferences were known by many of those who worked with him in the CIC, though it was seldom discussed openly. Max Bickerton, a fellow New Zealander working in the Shanghai office of the CIC, who was himself a homosexual of “the more outrageous sort” joked to Courtney Archer in 1946: “Think of Rewi Alley out there in the Gobi Desert with 300 boys!” The attitude of most foreigners in China at this time was to take on the Chinese attitude and politely ignore homosexual activities. Archer comments: "In China in those days, homosexuality was something
that was not talked about openly, but was taken for granted. It was casually
mentioned in the way you would say someone was a Roman Catholic or a
Presbyterian or whatever."58 Dr Bob Spencer and his wife Barbara, a nurse,
rang the school clinic for three years. According to Spencer, "We were vaguely
aware of Rewi Alley's proclivities and sexual activities. It didn't appear to be
affecting the boys in any way. We just did our jobs; it wasn't an issue. I'm sur­
prised now that we weren't more shocked at the time." In Shandan at the
time, however, Spencer felt that "If they want to live that way, what harm
is it doing?"59 Alley's closeness and affection for the boys was ad­
mired and respected by those who worked with him. George
Hogg's comments in his book I See a New China are representative:

The main distinctive feature of Rewi's cave in Shuangshipu is
exactly the same as that of his former house in Shanghai—that at
any time out of school hours it is filled with boys. Boys looking at
picture magazines and asking millions of questions. Boys playing
the gramophone and singing out of tune. Boys doing gymnastics
off Rewi's shoulders or being held upside down. Boys being given
enemas, or rubbing sulphur ointment into each other's scabies.
Boys standing in brass wash-basins and splashing soapy water
about. Boys toasting bare bottoms against the stove (the scar
against Rewi's own nether portions testifies to his own indulgence
in this form of amusement). Boys pulling the hairs on Rewi's legs,
or fingerling the generous portions of the foreigner's nose. "Boys
are just the same anywhere," says Rewi. "Wouldn't these kids have
a swell time in New Zealand."60

While Alley's sexuality was not an issue for those Westerners and
Chinese who knew of it in China, it would unquestionably have
been anathema to his supporters in New Zealand and other West­
ern countries who provided the funding for his humanitarian work.
It was fortunate for Alley that because it never was a concern in
China, he was able to keep it a secret from less sympathetic
individuals in the West.

Liberation

1 October 1949 marked the dawn of a new era in China. The communists
refer to this date as "Liberation"—liberation from the feudal and corrupt rule
of the Nationalist government and from foreign colonialism. Liberation
symbolized everything Alley had been working for in China for the previous
ten years. Yet on a personal level, Communist rule in China did not mean
liberation for Alley and other gay men. Now that civil order was being
restored, the Communist government was able to enforce its moral attitudes.
Centuries of relative sexual tolerance came to an end as the new government
began to close down the brothels and bathhouses that were the outward
manifestation of an entrenched sexual culture. At the same time, by harassment and in some cases imprisonment or expulsion, the government made it clear that Western capitalist influence was no longer welcome in China. The days of hedonism for sexual tourists in Shanghai were definitively over, while the Peking the aesthetes so loved and admired was a symbol of a feudal past the new regime sought to eradicate. The era of privilege for foreigners had ended.

Homosexual activity became a criminal offence in China, categorized, though not formally listed, under the crime of 'hooliganism', in Chinese 'liumang 流氓'. Homosexual activity certainly continued, but went underground. The puritanism of the government brought about a dramatic change in social attitudes towards sexuality. A shift in sexual terms reflected this social change: in place of the notion of 'tendencies' which allowed for a greater range in human sexual interaction, Chinese usage adopted the Western dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual (yixinglian 异性恋 / tongxinglian). Homosexuality began to be seen as an illness and a crime. Gays and lesbians could be arrested and sent to a labour-reform camp or prison. They might be sent to a clinic to receive treatments such as 'hate therapy' and 'electric therapy' to 'cure' them. They might even be shot if it was thought they were unredeemable. Max Bickerton, who had worked for the CIC and in 1949 took up a job teaching English at Peking University, was asked to leave China because of his homosexual activities. Yet a few other foreign gay men were allowed to stay on, perhaps because they were more discreet than Bickerton. According to Peter Townsend, who worked with him in the 1940s, Bickerton was very blatant about his sexual preferences; he would go out in the evenings dressed up in lipstick and makeup. Bickerton boasted to his co-worker Mavis Yan about his sexual exploits: “I had a wonderful night last night with a laundry man.”

In 1949, in remote Shandan, no-one could be certain how the Communist policies would affect their lives. Nonetheless, “just before liberation Alley called a meeting of men who were gay at Shandan, mostly Europeans, and told them to be a bit more circumspect because the PLA was very puritan about sex.” When the Communist forces arrived in Gansu, as elsewhere, they began the long process of reorganizing the society along Communist lines. In what was to become a pattern of Chinese political life, the cadres used political campaigns (yundong 运动) as a focus for thought reform. Under the new regime, all foreigners as well as Chinese at the school were required to register with the police. The circumstances of each person were investigated. Any who had worked for the Nationalists were immediately under suspicion. Alley and the foreign workers at Shandan had not only had contact with the former regime, they had received financial assistance from UNRRA, and were thus immediately suspected of being spies. The revelations of Dr Li Zhisui, doctor to Mao Zedong for twenty-two years, in *The private life of Chairman Mao, the inside story of the man who made modern China*, transl. Prof. Tai Hung-chiao (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), show that the outward puritanism of the CCP was merely superficial, especially in the case of the highest cadres. Interestingly, in Chairman Mao’s case, Dr Li not only describes his insatiable appetite for young women, but also (like many Chinese emperors before him) his enjoyment of handsome young men whom he asked to perform for him what Dr Li euphemistically calls “groin massage” (Li, *Private life*, pp.358–9). Typically, Dr Li does not classify Mao’s behaviour as homosexual (as a Western-trained doctor might); rather, he claims that it is simply a symptom of an over-active sexual appetite.

In 1950 “to oppose corruption, waste and bureaucracy inside the Party and state organs.” During the Three-Antis, Alley was accused of being an
agent of Western powers, authoritarian and overbearing, a reactionary spy and an anti-revolutionary. Yet amongst the many things that Alley was accused of during this campaign and later when he became a target in the Cultural Revolution, he was never criticized for having homosexual affairs. It was simply not regarded as a crime by those who were aware of it, and perhaps because so many at Shandan had themselves participated in such activities, there was no incentive to publicize the matter. Moreover, as Alley became useful to the Chinese Communist Government as a public figure, it was in everyone's interest that his “clean” image be maintained. That it was not regarded as a crime by those in the know is an indication that despite the public harassment of homosexuals in China after 1949, social tolerance continued on some level. However, my interviews and casual conversation with Chinese of later generations indicate that this tolerance no longer exists.

Figure 20

Rewi Alley in 1952 at the time of the Asian-Pacific Peace Conference (Garland Papers, ATL, 91-181-28). Note Alley's well-tailored Sun Yat-sen (Zhongshan zhuang) suit and gold pen in his top pocket which mark him as a high cadre

Under the anti-foreign policies of the new government it was no longer possible for Alley to stay on in Shandan. Yet Alley had no interest in returning to life in New Zealand. Through his contacts amongst the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, Alley was invited to attend the Asian-Pacific Peace Conference in Peking in 1952 as a New Zealand delegate. Alley's performance at the conference was so successful that he was offered a role as an official Peace Worker (nominally representing New Zealand) based in the Chinese-run Peace Committee. Alley's responsibilities included attending international peace conferences and promoting Chinese foreign policy. The Peace Worker role overlapped with another new role, that of Foreign Friend of China (waiguo pengyou 外国朋友). As a Friend of China, Alley acted as an envoy of the ‘New China’, working to promote ‘People to People’ relations with Western countries at a time when China was internationally isolated. The two roles made use of the international reputation he had already acquired during his work for the CIC. More than ever before these public roles required a high degree of conformity. Alley's behaviour, both past and present, had to be believed to be beyond reproach.68

After 1952, when Alley moved permanently to Peking, he made a clear choice between his personal life and the right to stay on in China.69 Under the puritanism of the Communist Government it was not possible for him to continue the lifestyle he had followed at Shandan. Instead he focused his energies on his new occupation. He continued to form close attachments to a number of young Chinese men, though it seems that these relationships were platonic.
Even this was restricted; depending on the political climate, Chinese were frequently forbidden contact with foreigners, even ‘Friendly’ ones like Alley. Most of those who only knew Alley after this time had no idea that he was gay; even some of the Chinese men with whom he formed close attachments were not aware of his sexual orientation. Two of those men whom I interviewed flatly denied that Alley was homosexual. Those who were aware of his sexuality kept silent. It is probable that Alley chose to be celibate after he moved to Peking. However, his bachelor status was an anomaly in a society which regards marriage as a social duty. Biographical articles

Figure 21

“Rewi Alley with delegates at the Asian-Pacific Peace Conference in 1952 at the Shuang Chao state farm near Beijing” (Kathleen Wright Collection, p.242, ATL)

69 Rewi Alley, letter to Pip Alley, 17 April 1972, 8/11, Alley papers, ATL.

Figure 22

“We are looking up at the monument for the fallen at Honghu, Hubei, November 1962.” Rewi Alley on tour as a ‘Friend’ (author’s collection)
invariably state that he did not marry because of his dedication to the Chinese revolution. A commemorative article written by Alley’s doctor, Zhao Gaiying, typifies the standard reasons given for his marital status:

Originally, when he was young, he ran a farm in his motherland New Zealand and he worked really splendidly. At the time, a young lady was very fond of him. Before long, Rewi Alley went to China; the young lady nevertheless wrote to him and told him she still wanted to marry him, on condition that he leave China and come back to New Zealand. Rewi Alley replied to her: “My work is in China. *China needs me*,” and thus broke the engagement. During the war years, Premier Zhou Enlai was very concerned about Alley’s lifestyle and suggested he think about getting married. [Alley] disagreed, saying: “I dash about all the time and it is very dangerous. If I died wouldn’t it harm the other person?”

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**Figure 23**

*Rewi Alley 1987 Christmas card, p. 13 (author’s collection)*
While the Chinese attitude towards Alley's homosexuality was to deny it, Western observers after 1949 were less tolerant. Foreigners in China after the 1950s were divided between those who, like Alley, were Friendly, and those who were there for work or study purposes. There was little mixing of the two groups, and this led to a mutual distrust. Alley was a prominent figure amongst the 'Friends', and he attracted unfavourable attention on account of his pro-China writings. Rumours circulated that he was a paedophile who liked Chinese little boys and that the Chinese Government was supplying him with these in return for his propaganda activities. An alternative rumour was that the Chinese Government was blackmailing him because of his proclivities, and forcing him to continue to write and speak favourably about China in exchange for not exposing the 'truth'. The evidence given in support of these allegations was that he was regularly seen at the summer resort of Beidaihe in the company of pre-adolescent Chinese boys and other Chinese men, and that some of his secretaries were good-looking males; also that Alley's annual Christmas cards, composed of shots taken with his own camera of Chinese children were examples of paedophilia. The cards sometimes contained pictures of children playing in the nude. To those inclined to believe rumours this might seem interesting, if one did not know that the boys were the sons of his adopted Chinese son Duan Shimou 段士谋 (Alan Alley), whom he took with him on holiday every year to get them away from the pollution of their home city, Lanzhou. Nor does it seem particularly remarkable that some of his secretaries were good-looking Chinese men; some of them were also good-looking Chinese women and no-one thought to comment on that. Moreover, Alley's innocent Christmas cards reveal nothing more than a sentimental attachment to

**Figure 24**

*Rewi Alley on holiday at Beidaihe, early 1980s (photograph courtesy Eva Stiao)*
Figure 25

Rewi Alley in the late 1980s (photograph courtesy Eva Siao)

children. The occasional shot of a Chinese child’s bottom in split pants could only seem salacious to puritanical, sex-saturated Western eyes unfamiliar with Chinese sartorial custom. What is interesting about these rumours is what they reveal about the homophobia of many in the West, who could not accept the validity of a non-heterosexual lifestyle, always associating it with ‘dirty old men’ and paedophilia.

Conclusion

By the time Rewi Alley died in 1987 at the age of ninety, he was one of the last of a generation of Western men attracted to China for the sexual freedom they found there. As we have seen, homosexual Westerners were drawn to China in the Republican era for a variety of reasons which included culture, politics, sex, adventure and travel. China provided a refuge to those fleeing the prejudices of their own societies. Tolerance and acceptance in traditional Chinese society towards same-sex love engendered a climate where sexual ambiguity could flourish. Since homosexuals in China were not peripheral or marginalized there was no need for a separate and specifically homosexual community to develop. During the Republican era, this began to change as Chinese society became influenced by Western culture, though the chaos of war and extra-territoriality delayed the implementation of these social changes. Prior to 1949, Rewi Alley and other foreigners benefited from this situation. The coming to power of an authoritarian Communist government which viewed homosexuality as a legacy of the feudal past brought this tolerance to an end. The dramatic change in attitudes towards sexuality from the Republican to the Communist era are an example of one of the more unfortunate outcomes of cross-cultural influence from the West to China.