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Canadian poet pens gem of anthology on China

By ROD CURRIE
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Nancy-Gay Rotstein has a law degree and is a member of the Ontario bar. She has a master's degree in history and is certified to teach high school English or history.

She could be a travel writer, or possibly a novelist.

Rotstein does none of the above.

Instead, she's a poet, which she says with a laugh is a "negative cash-return profession," but one she adores.

Her new volume, recently published in Canada and the United States, is a slim, elegantly evocative collection entitled *China: Shockwaves*, drawn from a 1980 tour she made on a special visa giving her total freedom to travel in China.

She uses words as if they were diamonds, selecting them sparingly and polishing them until they capture the exact image of the Chinese character or landscape that she wants.

It might be easier to tell the story in prose, Rotstein agrees, but poetry is her love, is more precise and has "a little more rhythm and music than prose."

"The economy of language is the best use of language. Each word has to work, to say something."

The China trip came just as the turmoil and "dark silence" of the 10-year Cultural Revolution were ending, when west-

ern travellers were an oddity and when China was beginning tentatively to look to the West for diplomatic, trade and cultural connections.

The title of her book, she said in a Toronto interview, "wrote itself — when a country as big and complex as China begins to move outward it must create international shock waves."

For Rotstein, who started studying law at age 39 in 1982, all her education is mainly to broaden her perspective as a poet, although she reluctantly agrees she might some day practise law. A member of the board of the Canada Council and the National Library Advisory Board, she lives in Barrie, Ont., with her businessman husband and three children.

In a departure from her two earlier books of poetry, Rotstein has included a forward to *Shockwaves* aimed mainly at westerners seeking to do business in China. She urges that they not trample on Chinese customs, thus creating "anger and envy in China where there are powerful forces who already feel there is too much contact with the West."

"The North American syndrome asserting privilege and demands is a luxury not permitted here," she writes.

Her often exquisite poetic snapshots of Chinese life are sometimes everyday or even trivial — the self-important block captain who "rules her numbered cement city with

frozen resolution," or the school kids robot-like in their drill-squad manoeuvres and then smiling and animated once they are released.

"And I am left to ponder," she writes in one poem, "which seedling personality we will permit to survive."

One of the best and longest poems is *Yangtze River Gorges*, a tangy account of a harrowing trip with two other westerners on a ferry crammed with more than 700 Chinese, accompanied by pig carcasses, geese in wicker baskets and bags of still-green mandarin oranges. It was so crowded "people slept on people," she says.

The three-day experience "could have been a chapter in a book," Rotstein says, but she has pared it to its eloquent essence in two pages, having written the opening line — "I descend into Dante blackness" — after boarding the ferry in darkness, down dangerously steep, slime-covered steps.

She works hard and fast when travelling — like an artist or photographer she feels she must capture "the passion and imagery on the spot" — and then labors long and tenaciously to polish and refine her poems, sometimes reworking them hundreds of times.

China: Shockwaves, by Nancy-Gay Rotstein. Published by McClelland and Stewart; 77 pages; \$10.95