

## China in prophecy and poetry

*They are moved into formation  
Regimented blue swatches  
Sectioned across Tiananmen  
Square  
For clocked showing.*

**E**VEN as she penned these words which now seem tragically ironic, Canadian poet Nancy Gay Rotstein was aware that the People's Republic was systematically digging its own grave. The term "Red China" now has all the signs of becoming a terrible epithet to an over zealous ideology but, like all of us, Rotstein failed to predict that its corpse would be so bloody.

Yet with a prescience which now seems extraordinary, Rotstein realised as early as 1980 that China was heading for another political revolution. "The structure," she wrote then, "is suspended on too fragile a guy wire . . . The greatest threat to rejuvenated China is ourselves. The North American syndrome asserting privilege and demands is a luxury not permissible here."

Indeed not, as events have shown. Rotstein's assessments are based on no sympathy for Li Peng's *ancien regime* but on her personal observation.

With the China crisis splashed all over the front pages you might be forgiven for thinking Rotstein's third collection of poetry is a cunningly timed attempt to cash in. This is certainly not the case. This delicately crafted book is already



### CHINA SHOCKWAVES

by Nancy Gay Rotstein  
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selling well in the US and Canada and its recent British publication is quite coincidental.

Rotstein visited China in 1980 and 1987. Her first visit came about when she was granted a special writer's visa from the Chinese government at a time when China was closed to foreigners.

She says: "This permission was unprecedented and I didn't know what I was getting into, but China had always fascinated me. The fact that I was a poet probably helped as they've always considered Mao to be a poet." So she made her journey to the interior, leaving behind three small children but accompanied by her husband — "He was afraid that I wouldn't get out."

She felt that China then was "like a window in time", and was



Rotstein: sense of outrage

determined to capture the immediacy of her response to its ever changing perspectives. "I couldn't sleep, and worked morning, noon and night. China is an explosion of images and poetry, to have passion and intensity must be written on the spot."

The musical cadence of her poetry with its dense compression of predominantly visual images seems almost designed to lull the unwary reader, but while she might owe some debt to the Imagists, Rotstein is no mere aesthete.

As a former history graduate who recently qualified as a lawyer, she has a keenly analytical mind. She is touchingly protective of the poet's status in this respect, maintaining that "the responsibility of the poet is to learn as much as she can about the existing body of know-

ledge in the world and then to add the poet's eye on top of it".

But whilst the lens of her Polaroid might well have been *made in China*, her imagination is unequivocally Western. Predictably she is critical of the Chinese lifestyle. "It's very hard to appreciate the degree of control over their everyday lives." Freedom of choice, the quasi-religious dogma of the West was, she found, virtually unknown in China.

"When I gave a speech to a graduation class in Hangchow I was silly enough to ask them what they would do when they graduated." No-one responded and she was curtly informed by their teacher "they'll do what they're assigned to do".

Rotstein is temperamentally and ethnically disposed to sympathise with the present Chinese dissenters who claim their government is fascist. Although she has no first hand experience of Nazism she says quietly, "I am Jewish and you never forget your roots". Not surprisingly, her poem "Lock Captain" depicts the Chinese official in neo Nazi terms:

*Her commandment face  
boasts a slash-smile*

*She controls the amount of  
living space and her decisions  
are quite arbitrary. Anyone  
wanting to marry has to have  
her say.*

In 1980 Rotstein found a country in transition and felt that the

Chinese were "flirting with change," a dangerous flirtation which she believed could lead to retrenchment. The availability of fashionable clothes and cosmetics failed to disguise the fact that China was becoming an increasingly divided society.

With a barely suppressed sense of outrage she speaks of Chinese workers "sleeping eight or nine to a room then coming into work to polish the marble in hotels which are like a theme park of America." Now that the "flirtation" has become the grand affair she is left to reflect sadly on poems where she wrote of

*Hand-touching students  
joyous in released animation*

and of the Yangtse river gorges where she made "a descent into a Dante-like inferno. It was like the beginning of creation."

Now that the "anaesthetized dragon" has woken, what of China's future? Well she says enigmatically, "there's an old Chinese curse which says 'may you live in interesting times'". But perhaps more to the point is her recognition of the culpability of the West which irresponsibly seems to infiltrate its values into Eastern cultures. In "A Visit To Thirteen Middle School", she writes:

*"And I am left to ponder  
which seedling personality  
we will permit to survive.*

Coleen Godley