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Canadian poet reflects on China

By Jill Lai
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WASHINGTON (UPI) — Today's China is a country seemingly glad to mingle with elements of the West again, with cities offering high-rise hotels, stores offering a variety of goods and a government more tolerant than it's been in decades.

But Canadian poet Nancy-Gay Rotstein feels the changes — welcome as they are — may not be permanent and she sees the danger of a retrenchment, born perhaps out of a resentment of the privileges accorded visiting Westerners.

"I am now very respectful of what's happened but I think it's very naive for us (Westerners) to be predictive" about China's future, said Rotstein, a member of the board of Canada's national arts body, The Canada Council.

Rotstein's views are the result of two trips she made to China, the first in 1980 and the second in 1987. Rotstein, who lives in Barrie, Ontario, spoke about her tours on a recent visit to Washington.

"In 1980 I was one of the first foreigners invited into China after the Cultural Revolution. I was on a special literary visa and allowed to travel anywhere I wanted to, by myself. It was very unusual," Rotstein said. "So I went wandering in the interior for a month, wandering around writing, observing, very aware that I had unique access."

The observations and her reaction to the country and its people are expressed in a recent book of poetry, "China: Shockwaves" (Dodd, Mead, 79 pp., \$12.95). It is a rare collection in that it is one of the few, in poetry or prose, by a Westerner that goes beyond the surface of China.

The poems are a record of the contrasts to be found — between the official tour of a commune and her own wandering onto a commune, of an angry child who "hurls his slingshot/ at the privilege limousine" leaving the Ming Tombs, or the "entourage politicians/ poise vid-eos" on the Great Wall.

Rotstein also recounts her trip on the Yangtze River.

"I was one of three foreigners. On all three sides there were glass balustrades and only three of us sitting at a little white table. I could see the faces of passengers, faces pressed against the balustrade, holding their children watching us. I thought to myself looking at privileges extended to us, how do they feel?"

With that experience and knowledge set firmly in her mind, it was with curiosity that years later she watched an American television network's weeklong broadcast out of China.

"To me it didn't look like the China I had remembered. ... I couldn't believe that much had changed so I wanted to go and see for myself, retrace where I'd been."

Her trip in the fall of 1987 took her to Beijing and Shanghai. The changes she saw was most evident in the variety of consumer goods.

"I felt it's still a country that's flirting with consumerism, a country in the process of transition. I really didn't feel it had changed that much (from 1980)," Rotstein said, adding that the people seemed, however, to be able to speak more openly in 1987.

"I guess the second major change is that the people seemed more relaxed. In 1980, when I went into a classroom, I'd see the children very regimented and disciplined, as you'd expect. Then they'd run into the playground and do drills with military precision. Running between the classroom and schoolroom, they were touching, linking arms, being more affectionate than we are in our society here.

"In '87, for example, in Hangchow I'd see teenagers holding hands while riding their bicycles in twilight when they thought no one was looking. Everywhere I went this time again reconfirmed what I saw in 1980, that the contrast was there between what was imposed on (the people) by the state and their own very real emotions."

What puzzled her, however, was how the modern hotels seemed to be built in the image of what an outsider might think America is like, almost as though for a "theme park of what America is."

And that troubles Rotstein.

"I don't understand how the Chinese who've sacrificed so much, who live eight, nine to a room ... I don't understand how they come in to work, polishing marble," she said. "I can see how (the Chinese government) might use these things to retrench into silence.

"It's very important that the doors stay open. When Tibet closed, they blamed the influence of foreign ideas. That's why I feel the changes aren't entrenched, that they are flirting with consumers, flirting with change."