

**Excerpt from Jose, N. (1994). Oodgeroo in China. *Australian Literary Studies*, 16(4), 42.**

"Oodgeroo saw herself as an ambassador for Aboriginal culture. At first she may have been overwhelmed by the impact of Chinese culture, acknowledging the contrast between its achievements and the fate of her own comparably ancient culture. She was homesick, and the tug of home led her to relate China always back to her own cultural heritage, which she had a tremendous capacity to share with the people she met. In this way Oodgeroo connected herself with China too...

Within the group, and within Oodgeroo herself, a momentous event of another kind was taking place. She had written no poetry for some six years before her trip to China. Her life was extraordinarily busy, activist and public. She had private problems to deal with. She had an established literary reputation. But for any writer, not to write, however easily explained, must be an uncomfortable condition. One morning Oodgeroo said to Manning: "I'm pregnant again." She meant she had started to write poetry. During her three weeks in China she produced a suite of sixteen poems. The first one, published as "China . . . Woman" was inspired, if I have reconstructed the circumstances correctly, by a tour of the Forbidden City in Peking on 17 September 1984 and written over the next few days...

"China . . . Woman" is general and synoptic, giving voice to the affinities Oodgeroo found with China. As an Aborigine she compares the Great Wall to the Rainbow Serpent; as a woman she conceives China as dignified and fecund; as a revolutionary she registers the weight of the past, the struggle for change and also, in a sharp image of Beihai, the once-imperial park, some of the ironies of the present:

High peaked mountains  
Stand out against the sky-line.  
The great Wall  
Twines itself  
Around and over them,  
Like my Rainbow Serpent,  
Groaning her way,  
Through ancient rocks . . .  
China, the woman  
Stands tall,  
Breasts heavy  
With the milk of her labours,  
Pregnant with expectation.

The people of China  
Are now the custodians of palaces.  
The wise old  
Lotus plants,  
Nod their heads  
In agreement. (Kath Walker in China)

In their published form, in sequence, the poems offer a journal of the trip, and, as befits diary entries, they are informal, spontaneous, catching fleeting pictures and unresolved thoughts, tied to the specific evanescent occurrences of the visit...

Oodgeroo's response, in her effusion of poetic fragments, sidesteps the need to reach conclusions, while registering with sensitivity the wonder (in every sense of the word) that she experienced. The underswell is the personal reference back to herself and what she knows. In the Reed Flute Cave at Guilin, for instance, she writes:

I shall return home,

And I'm glad I came.

Tell me, My Rainbow Spirit

Was there just one of you?

Perhaps, now I have time to think,

Perhaps, you are but one of many guardians

Of earth's people ...

The China poems are less public, less oratorical than her more familiar work. In their free, spare, elliptical immediacy, they have an imitation-Chinese quality, reminiscent at times of Maoist revolutionary verse (for example, "Sunrise on Huampu River")...

Among the many results of the visit was a proposal to publish the poems that Oodgeroo had written during the trip in a bilingual edition, as a joint venture between Jacaranda Press and the International Culture Publishing Corporation of China. The proposal was brought to fruition by John Collins, thanks to his well-established contacts with Chinese publishers, notably Mr Xu Liyi, then Vice-President of the Chinese Publishers Association...

The volume is unique in many ways. As far as I can establish, it contains the first Aboriginal writing published in China. It is the first single volume of an Australian poet's work, male or female, published in China, and the first joint literary publication, and so on. Some 2000 copies were taken for distribution in China, the remaining 850-1000 were sent to Australia.

Perhaps because of its peculiar publishing history, Kath Walker in China seems to have dropped from sight. The book is not widely known, and the poems have not been given much of a place in Oodgeroo's oeuvre. This is a pity...

Kath Walker in China shows Oodgeroo as a poet in her response to an extraordinary world."

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