

**Warning:—This story features words connected with the life story of Uncle Gubbo Ted Thomas.
Reading may cause sadness or distress.**

Acknowledgement:— We respectfully acknowledge the Sovereign Custodians of the land and waters upon which we live and work, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation and to the Yuin peoples who have supported our project. We pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. We extend this respect to all First Peoples.

寻根，在伍龙岗 / Seeking Roots in Wollongong

Shen Jiawei

记于 1999 年 / Recorded in 1999

This short text is a story about Guboo. However, I'd first like to mention Billy [Snow], an artist and activist at Bundeena, where I live and work. Billy is like a contemporary Don Quixote. He challenges the big monopolising capitalist machines symbolised by Coca Cola or Santa Claus. When all the cars in Bundeena have a warning sign, 'Reduce Speed', stuck on the tails of their vehicles, he has a slogan tied on the bumper bar of his broken van, with a bamboo stick and wiring that says: 'Reduce Greed'. Billy himself may become the protagonist of another story, but today he only plays a supporting role.

One day, Billy said to me that he knew an Aboriginal Elder. Keith, another artist in Bundeena, was begging to be introduced to the Elder as he wished to make a portrait of him and enter it in the Archibald Prize. Billy wondered if I'd like to come along to the introduction, adding, 'His maternal grandfather was Chinese.' 'When are we going?' I eagerly asked. So, Billy, Keith and I, hit the road. Keith was a quiet guy in his early 40s. I say so because I was in my early 50s, with a small handful of beard, whereas Billy was over 60, with a faceful of whiskers. By comparison, Keith did not have a single hair on his face.

When we got into the van, Billy showed me some old printed matter. Declarations around the Green Peace Movement, as well as a tattered photo album from twenty years ago, with bush images and an Aboriginal man with a strip of cloth around his head. This was the Aboriginal Elder we were going to meet. His full name was Guboo Ted Thomas, commonly known as Guboo (meaning 'good friend' in his Yuin language). Ten years ago, Billy had a party in honour of Guboo Ted in Bundeena, celebrating his 80th birthday. In recent years, the Elder had settled down in Wollongong.

To go from Bundeena to Wollongong, you drive through a string of picturesque towns and arrive at the city centre in forty to fifty minutes. Not far from there and in front of a building of units, we parked our van. An older man with a long, pristine white beard and hair flowing met us with a walking stick in front of the building and led us inside.

His face, slightly darker than a Chinese person, with few wrinkles, radiated with spirit and energy. His forehead was broad. He had a high nose with a sharp tip, the kind that most Chinese would admire. His thin lips and powerful lower jaw would render his face a handsome one by Chinese standards. In answer to my interior musings or perhaps because I had been staring at him for quite some while, Guboo came over and whispered in my ear, saying, 'My mother is Chinese! I'll show you her photo.'

With that, he went into the inner room to fetch the photograph. It was an enlarged reproduction depicting an Asian woman wearing a white Western gown. This woman was undeniably Guboo's mother, 'a chip off the old block,' as the saying goes.

One could figure that Guboo would have been born in around 1909. Seven or eight years before the recently established 'Federation of Australia' had adopted the White Australia policy. I figured there must be an extraordinary story of how Guboo's mother and father married. Guboo didn't tell, nor did I ask. I was more interested in the result of that history—Guboo, who fascinated me.

Billy was chatting with Guboo. He had brought food, sandwiches of banana and other fruit as Guboo was a vegetarian. Guboo was happily eating while Keith was earnestly drawing from life. I took a seat on the side, sketching as I listened to Billy chatting with Guboo about the old days, glancing at the pictures on the walls from time to time. One of the pictures had a rainbow pattern and an eagle - with the slogan 'JINTA JUNGU—BE UNITED'. It was the logo of the World Peace Council of Indigenous Elders.

As I listened, I got to know more about Guboo's experience. An elder of the Aboriginal Yuin peoples, he grew up in an Aboriginal community in Wallaga Lake, on the South Coast of New South Wales. But it wasn't until he had a clear consciousness of self that he began seeking his roots. He viewed Mumbulla Mountain as the real home of his tribe and began, from decades ago, actively fighting for Aboriginal equality and rights on his lands. He said to me, 'We have our laws that are different from the whites. Our laws come from the bush.'

His activities transcended the national boundary so that in 1984 he was invited to visit the United States of America. He became a guest of the Indians in Dallas and was presented with the title of Honorary Citizenship from a local city there. He went to the Netherlands, India and many other places, advocating for equality and environmental protection. One of the declarations was even an appeal to mankind to respect Nature as a result of the Chernobyl tragedy. About ten years ago, he adopted the Bahá'í faith, a religion of pacifism that combines the tenets of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. In recent years, he has been calling for reconciliation between the Aboriginal people and the white people.

From time to time, Guboo and Billy got excited reminiscing about the past. When that happened, he would draw pictures in the air with his arms. Fascinated by his gestures, I hastily took out my camera and pressed the shutter nonstop. Billy, indirectly, hinted that I might have been in the wrong, 'Why did you keep snapping like a tourist?' That left me embarrassed. But Guboo thought nothing of it, saying, 'Keep snapping!' When he made an exception allowing me to continue, I felt like we were compatriots.

Indeed, in the few hours when we were together, I had a wonderful sensation, feeling as if I were in my old home, visiting an elderly person in my family. Guboo felt so close to me that he seemed like one of my grand uncles from a previous generation. Even though he spoke an Aboriginal language, he himself a representative of the Aboriginal culture, his Chinese face kept drawing me back into this feeling that this was also one of my Elders.

When Guboo saw my painting, he went into the inner room again and brought out two sketches of his head portraits, saying, 'This one is by my daughter and the other one, one of my other sons'. He then showed us some other paintings and one of his 'works': a number of one-page declarations and a large folio, one of the pages in it showing 'Song of Guboo', as recorded by a reporter. On an impulse, Guboo began singing the song with Billy. The Aboriginal words and the strong rhythms left me fascinated. I found them unforgettable.

A month after, Guboo, along with his followers, went to the bush to hold an annual Peace Camp and celebrated his 90th birthday.

记于 1999 年

Recorded in 1999.

One makeup note in 2013:

In 2002, I loaned my painting of Guboo to one of his sons to be placed at his memorial. Afterwards, it was on permanent display in the Culture Centre of the Yuin nation ("Centre"). When the Centre was closed in 2009, I collected the artwork. In March that same year, it was shown at the National Art Museum of China. Shortly after, in May, it was exhibited in Beijing alongside works by other Chinese Australian artists as part of the exhibition 'Coming Home'. It is now on permanent display in the new building of Xin Jin Shan Chinese School Library.

¹ Translated from the Chinese by Ouyang Yu. Co-edited in English by Shen Jiawei and Emma Thomson on the occasion of the exhibition Silent Dialogue / 沉默的对话.