



AAP Interview: Wah-Ming Chang

Fiction writer Wah-Ming Chang of Ithaca, New York, wrote *The Tenth Girl*, recently received the Mary Roberts Rinehart Grant as well as the Bronx Writers' Center Chapter One Award. Asian American Press caught up with her recently to discuss her work and writing.

Interview by:
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Asian American Press (AAP): What was your story about?

Wah-Ming Chang (WMC): The piece I'd sent the Bronx Writers' Center is the first chapter of a novella set inside a collection of stories, all of which gathered together will be what I'm calling a novel.

Each story reflects upon the disappearance of a brilliant woman named Lulu; as a whole, I'm looking to explore the impact of Chinese literature and art on a community of forgers in NY's Chinatown. One story is forthcoming in *Mississippi Review*, called "The Clay Library." (The book will be called either *The Clay Library* or *The Broken Scroll*.)

AAP: How far along are you with your novel?

WMC: If I had to put a figure on how far along I am with this project, then I'd say . . . 15 percent? Okay, I'll be optimistic and say 20 percent. I'm forcing patience on my soul, there's no way around it. I started this project in 2001, when I had to write an academic essay for a Chinese history class in graduate school. I hadn't written an essay in five years, so I completely balked, couldn't figure out the form (I was in grad school for creative writing).

Luckily, one of the historians I had to write about is a fascinating and innovative writer--Jonathan Spence--and with his experiment in reconstructing Kang-hsi's life through the emperor's personal documents, coupled with my growing obsession with Borges, I decided to write an essay-story.

It's not a very original tactic, I know, but I'm so glad I came to it, because my ideas and interests suddenly all fell into place and made sense; I had a focus finally. No clue as to when I'll be done with this project, though, as I keep rewriting that first chapter. . . But again: patience.



AAP Interview: Wah-Ming Chang

I joked with Leslie Shipman that the Bronx Writer's Center should offer a Chapter 2 competition, then Chapter 3, and so on, so that I and others like me can actually get somewhere in our novels. . . . But fortunately, I'm surrounded by talented, encouraging writers, and so I'm inspired every day to keep pushing forward.

AAP: What's your story?

WMC: I was born in NYC, then my family moved to the suburbs, first in Queens, then to NJ. After college in Baltimore, I moved back to NYC, have been here now for about 8 years, minus the 2 in Ithaca for grad school.

AAP: Who's on your reading shelf these days?

WMC: I'm working on three projects, and several writers influence each: Juan Rulfo and Robert Walser; Ha Jin, Franz Kafka, and *The New York Times*; and for the project that won the BWC contest, they are Cervantes, Dashiell Hammett, Paul Auster, Siri Hustvedt, Francois Cheng, W. G. Sebald, and Jorge Luis Borges.

AAP: Is there anyone you're looking forward to reading soon?

WMC: Akira Yoshimura's *Storm Rider*, and Murakami's new novel--Kafka is in the title! I love translations, I respect the discipline very much; just looked through the Harcourt catalog, and I've dog-eared nearly every page advertising a translation. I'm writing a story called "To Read Kafka in Chinese," about a camp for kids who aspire to be translators--I guess that sums up my interests, yes?

AAP: How did you get started writing?

WMC: My H.S. English teacher submitted some of my writing to contests (without telling me!), and I won a playwriting contest and got 2nd place in a local college magazine contest. So I guess I felt pretty confident about the submission process back then. Then I zeroed in on JHU with the sole intention of working with Stephen Dixon, my hero at the time, and somehow I got in.



AAP Interview: Wah-Ming Chang

Later, somehow I made it into some MFA programs, and the attention was very flattering and kept my outward confidence pretty healthy. With all this attention around my potential, I felt that I just needed to find a serious focus (as opposed to my college relationshipy stories that went nowhere), after which I would feel ready for the professionals to judge the work on a competitive level.

What really got me going, though, was the first story I wrote at grad school, which won the Mary Roberts Rinehart Award from GMU. No publication, just a nice monetary award and some recognition. Then it got placed as a finalist in the Arts & Letters Journal contest, and the fiction editor, Kellie Wells, asked to publish it. You can find it on their web site; it's called "The Tenth Girl."

After that experience, I was very heartened, and for some reason at the beginning of each of the 4 semesters of grad school, I was able to crank out really refreshing, interesting pieces--refreshing and interesting at least to me--each of which has brought me some recognition (Saltonstall grant and the BWC award) and which has expanded into a longer project. (By my obligatory second workshop submission later in each semester, though, my steam ran out, and I submitted silly items inspired by nothing but boredom and anxiety.)

Also, before any kind of recognition, I dared only to focus on writing short stories; now I feel brave enough--though no less foolish or scared--to try my hand at novels. I won't deny that an award is a good boost to the literary ego. . . it also showed me a different perspective to my stories--that they could and should be and are parts of longer projects, that there's always more to them than the final word on the page.

AAP: What's the best comment you've heard about your work?

WMC: That I've matured as a writer.

AAP: What draws you to the work of authors like Borges and Kafka?

WMC: One writer I know said he didn't care for Borges because he, Borges, was too cold. But to me, I revel in that coldness, because underneath it is a vast realm of playfulness that warms me right up. Borges and Kafka are, in fact, startlingly funny. I can't read their stories without giggling and feeling like I'm in on a joke (with Kafka, I'm thinking specifically about his unfinished novel, *The Castle*; his short stories are beautiful tragedies rather than comedies).



AAP Interview: Wah-Ming Chang

Not that I can necessarily pinpoint what the joke is, but I picture these writers winking at me--Borges more so. Their generosity with storytelling and language is humbling. With Kafka, there seems to be no resolution to anything, but his writing mesmerizes me because he says that the possibilities are in fact infinite.

Other writers in the Borges and Kafka category, like Sebald, are enchanting for me. Their stories are endless and leisurely and yet packed with an underlying dread and morality, very stiff stuff that touch on the fabric of life, rather than on life itself. You can go anywhere in them.

AAP: Do you think you would ever try translating another author's work in the future?

WMC: Translating in the future? No, no, I have a difficult enough time articulating myself in English and in Chinese, I don't dare to mangle any other language. I'm simply fascinated by and covet the process and intimacy of translation.

One exercise I like is to read different translations of the same work. "Borges and I" is a good example. *Don Quixote* is another. Then I can see how translators rework language for a different effect, however slight. If only I could read the original . . . but I try to compensate by snatching up all the translations I can find.

I saw Edith Grossman give a talk about her translation of *Don Quixote*, and there was Alastair Reid, translator and friend of Borges, introducing her. I couldn't have been happier. If they hadn't said a word the entire night, I really couldn't have been happier. Recently, I saw the film director Zhang Yimou be interviewed at the Asia Society. So very interesting for me to watch this. Zhang spoke to the interviewer as though she understood what he was saying, and she nodded at him also as though she understood.

When he finished talking, all attention turned to the translator. Once, the translator forgot his job, chuckling for a long time at a funny story Zhang had recounted, and some non-Chinese-speakers shouted for him to translate. It was all very strange and funny and touching.

What was most interesting was hearing both the Chinese and the English, and trying to force myself not to understand either. Not possible. There was plenty of Chinese that I didn't understand, don't get me wrong, but I know the intonations, I know the rhythms of speech, why the tone in a sentence would go up and then down, etc. But to know that while reading, now that's another story . . .



AAP Interview: Wah-Ming Chang

AAP: How would you describe your writing process?

WMC: Well, I've burned out two laptops, so now work on a sturdy desktop at home. Because I no longer have the luxury of carrying around a laptop, which I did all the time before, I write in longhand in lovely little notebooks (currently, I'm enamored of those with graph paper), which has turned out to be very good for me, though it was difficult at first to adapt to. Also I print material to review during my lunch breaks (I work a full-time 9-to-5 job).

If I had a laptop, I would, as before, bring it everywhere with me, even to work, because then I could take it to a cafe during lunch and spend a good hour (or two, shh) writing away. I fantasize about that quite a bit.

I guess I haven't described the process, though . . . Well, I get ideas from the news and from photographs and from odd events that happen to me now and again. I have snippets of stories all over my computer, and if I'm bored by one project, I go to one of these snippets to see if it fits into a project. Sometimes, if I've lost my way, I'll reread the writer who'd influenced the piece in the first place, to get that spark back and get lost in his/her world again. I mentioned that I rewrite a lot.

Revising should really be done after the piece has been through a draft; instead, I fix things even though the piece is nowhere near what you'd respectfully call a first draft. That's dangerous; it's hard to finish or stay interested in a project this way, especially if it's a long one.

Sometimes I try to plow straight through, so I could at least reach the next chapter, but then I find this to be numbing, as the words look dead and repetitious and I have no attachment to any of them. I have to figure out how to satisfy this one need to savor the language and the other need to finish the story.

Before I began to seriously focus on longer works, I could focus on cranking out a story in a couple of weeks and then revising it for a month or two, and if the story was good enough, I found that all I needed to do was tweak the language and flesh out a few scenes. Now, with longer works, I'm constantly rearranging and deleting sections, paragraphs, chapters (this gets less and less painful as time goes by, thank goodness).

And with writing longhand in cafes, I explore scenes that don't follow anything in the main narrative, so I'm really all over the place. Sometimes, to anchor myself, I have to sketch out short outlines. Drives me nuts, but oh the rush when I print the thing out (again) and read it with that new perspective.



AAP Interview: Wah-Ming Chang

AAP: What do you look for most in your own writing?

WMC: Do you mean how do I critique myself? or what I want to do with the writing? I want to be original--but I know everything is borrowed, so I want to be part of that un-originality in as exciting a way as possible for myself. If it's exciting and mysterious and satisfying to the reader, even better.

AAP: What advice would you have for beginning writers?

WMC: I can only advise how to stay sane, I think. Be careful of ego, your own and others'. Reading and writing is so subjective, there's no way to please everybody, so accept that from the start. Learn from what you've done satisfactorily and unsatisfactorily, productively and unproductively, and move on.

Write every day. Read every day. Read critically, i.e. , try to figure out what your favorite writers are doing right and wrong. If somebody's published your idea before you could, don't fret, just rewrite the story from another angle and make it better than the published one. Be interested in and aware of other genres and forms--I'm into blending fiction and nonfiction right now; I'm also thinking of doing fiction/dance and fiction/painting, both necessarily performance pieces, of course. And write anything and everything! You never know where a genre (or nongenre) will take you.

So experiment.

Be excited by what you write. Be excited by what others write. Be kind and generous by helping to create a writing community, be it through workshops, setting up readings, or--and this is a favorite of mine--setting up dancing outings with your fellow writers.