

Brian O'Grady and
Adam O'Connor Rodriguez

A Conversation with Lan Samantha Chang October 28, 2004

Lan Samantha Chang was born to Chinese immigrants, who left China when the communist government came to power in 1949. Her parents moved to the small Midwestern city of Appleton, Wisconsin. Chang said that since her Midwestern youth, she's "constantly been moving, perhaps unconsciously to replicate my parents' experiences." Her books—a collection of stories, Hunger (1998), and the novel Inheritance (2004)—demonstrate a desire to not only learn about and replicate her family and cultural history, but also to discover more about how culture and family relate to identity.

She holds a BA in East Asian Studies from Yale, an MPA from Harvard, and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop—an experience she said was "the best thing I ever did." She is currently the Briggs-Copeland Lecturer at Harvard University.

Ms. Chang was interviewed over lunch at the Silver City Grill, a restaurant in the Ridpath Hotel, downtown Spokane, Washington.

Before the interview, we discussed politics, moving, then her writing process.

ADAM O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

What does an "on" writing week look like for you?

LAN SAMANTHA CHANG

I've been fortunate to be able to get up and write right away. So, an "on" week for me would have me waking up in the morning with very little interaction with people and working for three or four hours—until my mind gets tired. For a long time, I lived in a studio apartment, so it was basically twelve feet from my bed to my writing desk. I kind of liked that. I felt like my life was focused in a way it no longer is. When I first moved to Cambridge—because of the high price of real estate—I wrote in my office at school. I think writing at school slowed me down, because

of the internet. I would turn on the computer and worry that somebody had written me an e-mail; that would take up a few minutes and divert my mind. When I'm really "on," I write before I check my e-mail. And I've organized my life so the e-mail is at school and I don't have access at home. After I started living with somebody in my studio apartment, it was hard to work at home so I worked at school. I think that's one of the reasons the last part of my novel took so long to write.

BRIAN O'GRADY

Did you move as you were finishing *Inheritance*?

CHANG

I moved constantly while I was writing the novel. I wrote the first draft of the novel in California. Then I moved to Iowa City for seven months. I moved to New Jersey for about a year. One month, I lived in Wyoming. That was my official residence, because I was between apartments at the time. Then I moved from there to Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a year, then I moved to Iowa City for a year, then I moved back to Cambridge and finished it there.

O'GRADY

With so much moving around, how long did it take to complete the novel?

CHANG

Seven years. And I probably lost a year to those moves. Every time I moved, I lost at least two months. One month to pack up, the other to get settled.

O'GRADY

Did that throw your writing off?

CHANG

It didn't throw my writing off—teaching threw me off. Starting a new teaching job can disrupt my rhythm, depending on the intensity of the experience. Another thing that disrupts me is changes in my non-writing life. Getting married, that was a disruption. But other writers I know say it's possible to make these adjustments and figure out a way to get the work done. I think the challenge for writers is figuring out how to write and live at the same time. That's why graduate school is great. Even

though you don't realize it, you have so much time. It's really wonderful. Later, you look back and think "Lord, I could've done so much more." I could be wrong, but in general, that seems to be the case.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

In the novel, *Inheritance*, people move a lot, too. Do you think that's related to your real life?

CHANG

I think that because of the material I covered in the novel, moving was a structural challenge I had to overcome as I wrote. My characters were born in the eastern coastal area of China, then they moved to inland China, then to the eastern part again but to a different city, then Taiwan, then two different parts of the United States. I think that was a typical pattern for a person born of that era and of that particular class or group. There's a whole group of immigrants to the United States who left China in the late 1940s or even 1949, when the communists came to power, moved to Taiwan, then came to the United States for their educations. And they all know each other; it seems like they do anyway. Whenever I run into their children, it always turns out they had something in common with my parents. It was a little diaspora. Their lives were highly mobile. My mother, for example, moved 26 times before she was 18. After that, she moved to the United States, met my father and settled in Wisconsin.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Are they still there?

CHANG

They're still there. I think that's because my mother needs to feel like she belongs to a place. Although she's never said so in so many words, I think their moving around so much when they were young has made them appreciate being in one place, whereas I grew up in Wisconsin, was born and raised in Wisconsin, went to high school in Wisconsin. And since then, I've constantly been moving, perhaps unconsciously to replicate my parents' experiences. But I think it's more that I've followed my writing opportunities, and I haven't had any control—but no, that's not true: it's not that I haven't had control; it's that I've chosen to follow the opportunities with nothing to tie me down. Until now. Now

I'm married. Now I work in Cambridge. We've moved to Somerville, bought a place to live. And we still don't feel tied down. We feel like we could move. We feel like we could still be free.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Did *Inheritance* mirror your own family's history?

CHANG

It's not a family history. In fact, there's almost nothing in the book that happened to my family. But my father's brother was actually a communist. And my father did find out about it sort of accidentally. Not in the same way Li Ang discovers his brother's a communist. What happened to my father was, he and his brother spent some time traveling when they were young, for college, because the Japanese had encroached upon the north and had occupied Beijing, where they were from. People left the occupied territories in groups, and one of the groups was an educational movement. The universities tried to move to southwestern China, where the new capital was, and form their own interim, wartime university. My father was part of that university. So he left home pretty early on. But his path led him away from his brother, to Taiwan. My father wasn't a communist but he wasn't a nationalist, either. He was apolitical, so he left China because he thought there would be upheaval and trouble when the communists took over. There was a period from 1949 until the 1980s when China was basically out of reach to the average person who didn't live there. My father had no news of his family at all. Then when Mao died, the country began to slowly open up. My father found news of his family and went to visit them, at which point he learned his brother had died. And he also came to understand that his brother had been a very active communist party member. He returned to China in the early 1980s, and when he was there, while looking at some publication, he saw a list of high-level communist officials and saw the name of a guy he knew growing up, his brother's best friend. And he realized that somehow the two of them had become communists together. This was so interesting to me—because I knew so little about my father's family—that it worked into my mind. I was writing about a country divided by politics and war, and it seemed that writing a book about a divided family would be an accurate view. I wanted to write about the intersection between something very large and a very intimate story, so that was one of the ways I was able to access such an intersection.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

While *Inheritance* might not be a “political” novel, it has a definite interest in politics in so many ways—family, sexual politics—but also the politics of immigration. How did the political changes in China affect the families and eventually push them to America?

CHANG

That is something that has happened as long as immigrants have been coming to the United States. Pressure—often political—in their home country pushes a people out in search of a better life, and, as I said, I think my parents belonged to a certain wave generated by civil war, the fall of nationalism, and the rise of communism. That’s interesting to me. I think about all immigrant writers, especially the wave of Jewish writers after World War II--...

O'GRADY

I wanted to ask you about that. You mentioned in an interview that you had a real interest in second generation Jewish immigrants.

CHANG

When I was first learning to write, I was deeply influenced by a Bernard Malamud story called “The Magic Barrel.” I don’t know why the story stuck with me as much as it did, except that there’s a deep sense of longing there. In the story, Leo Finkle’s parents are both dead, and there’s a sense that, while he’s living alone, he needs to move on, and yet he doesn’t know how to find somebody with whom to do that. I think that sort of isolation, cultural isolation, affected me, as did the character Pinye Salzman, a sad marriage broker who smells like fish and has an unpleasant home life, who is trying to work miracles for this young man and eventually does. The fairy tale quality of the story seems to have combined the contemporary life of New York at the time with a sense of long ago and far away. It speaks of the idea of an “old country.” The emotional resonance of post World War II Jewish writers really speaks to me. Phillip Roth’s first book was really important to me while I was learning to write as well. I read an introduction he wrote to an anniversary edition of *Goodbye, Columbus*. In the introduction, he said that he was completely taken with the idea of departure, obsessed with the idea of leaving, at the time. And really, the book is about leaving your culture and holding on to your culture and I think that really

struck me at different points of my life. Particularly because in studying writing, in becoming a writer, I was essentially leaving behind some of the hopes of my parents.

O'GRADY

You've talked a little about the assimilation issue and how that ties in with your interest in Jewish writers after World War II. How does that play out in your stories?

CHANG

I think assimilation is a central issue only in one of my stories, one called "The Unforgetting." It's about a Chinese family that moves to the Midwest and tries to leave their old life, but as time goes on, they find that they can't forget the old life. Meanwhile, their son, who was raised American, does what Americans do: leaves home. I think that captured some of my feelings about assimilation—that it's necessary to a certain extent, but at the same time, it's a tremendous loss. I mean, it can be a particular loss in the relationship between parents and children and different generations of immigrants.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Related to that, I read that you visited China for the first time as an adult. Did you feel more like an American visiting a foreign country, or more of a "homecoming" feeling?

CHANG

I felt both like an American and a person coming home. We entered China by flying into Hong Kong, then we flew into Guilin, which is in central southern China. It's a region famed for its scenery, and I recognized the oddly-shaped mountains from beautiful pictures my parents had hung in our living room. But I could tell the people there saw me as a foreigner, since I was clearly raised somewhere else—I didn't speak the local dialect, and my Chinese is a little awkward. So I felt odd. But as we went further north, closer to where my father was from, I felt more and more at home. China's a huge country, and the people everywhere are different. People up north are taller—you could say generally they tend to be taller and look more like me. As we got closer to where my father was from, I felt that I was encountering some familiar element I couldn't explain, partly because the people started to look more like me

and the dialect became more familiar, sounded more like my father's dialect. Actually, he doesn't speak a dialect, he speaks Mandarin with a Beijing accent. And as we went toward Beijing and then Xi'an, I felt as if I really was discovering where my family came from. I then met my father's family and there were a lot of similarities, even though we were essentially strangers. I think in that way, it was a homecoming. And I remember going to Shanghai, where my mother's from, and seeing all the buildings and places I had read about or she had told me about, so I had the feeling I was going someplace familiar.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Do you think that homecoming feeling inspired what Xiao Hong felt in *Inheritance* when she returned to China to visit her aunt?

CHANG

I do. And it's also a feeling that many people have told me about.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Were any of the place descriptions of China based on what you saw when you were there?

CHANG

Almost all. The description of Chongqing, the description of the landscape around there, the Yangtze River, the description of West Lake, were things I had seen. I will say, though, there were certain descriptions I had to completely invent. For example, I was in a bomb shelter when I was in Chongqing. I went to a couple of them, but I was never in one when it was being bombed at night.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

That would've been hard to simulate.

CHANG

Right, exactly.

O'GRADY

The gambling in the book—did you do research?

CHANG

Well, I went to Las Vegas and I played Paigao.

O'GRADY

They have that in Vegas?

CHANG

Yeah, and it's actually all over in California, too. I learned a lot about it when I was living in California. And I asked my mother about it. She had played it as a child on New Year's. It's sort of a child's game, but it can be quite devastating. Basically the host either wins or loses big, and it's entirely up to chance; there's no skill involved. Not like poker, where there's some skill involved. Paigao isn't like that.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

You say your mother knew how to play, but in *Inheritance*, only the men get to play.

CHANG

Well, the men were the ones who got to leave home and start gambling, although women gambled all the time, too. I mean, my grandmother was a huge Mahjong player; she played constantly. According to my mother, they would start in the morning and play until early morning, go to sleep, then get up and start playing again. I don't understand what the pleasure was. I'm not interested in games. But my father is interested in games, and my parents play Mahjong now that they're retired.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

So you didn't have much fun in Vegas?

CHANG

Not really. I'm not a gambler by nature. It seemed to me that after I'd been writing the book for a while, I realized one of the interesting aspects of the book was that there was an element of extreme chance that was represented by the game, and an element of extreme control, which was Junan, the main character. She was obsessed with trying to control the outcome, control the outcome to the point where she made the biggest mistake of her life—

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

She took it to her death, really. That was the one sad thing I felt about the ending. I felt that a lot of things in the book were resolved happily, though bittersweet. But Junan stuck to her guns until the end.

CHANG

She really did. See, I like her for that. I mean, I was interested in a certain kind of characterization, character development different from the psychological model that says someone undergoes a transformation, or that we, as readers, must understand more deeply the psychological reasons for the characters' behaviors. And I feel that in my book, no one really undergoes a psychological transformation. Well, several of the characters do not undergo psychological transformations. Particularly Junan. She is the same; however, we see her in so many settings that we learn more about the degree and the nature of her obsessions. That is a different kind of character development.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

But I think as a reader, I rooted for Yinan to reconcile with Junan. Her not achieving reconciliation set a different tone for the end of the book.

CHANG

I like the idea of acknowledging that there are things that are not settled by our lives, and there are questions that can't really be resolved. That feels more real to me than the idea that everything can be happily resolved. I don't know, because I haven't died yet. I don't know what that's like and it'll be too late by then.

O'GRADY

How has your degree in Asian Studies helped your writing? Do you think it's important for a writer to have knowledge of an outside discipline?

CHANG

I have mixed feelings about how to answer this question. I teach undergraduates, many of them very serious writers, and they want to know if they should major in English. I always tell them they don't have to. At the same time, if I could go back and do it all over again, I would take a lot more English courses than I did in college. Of course, when I was in college, I had no idea I was going to become a writer, and I was taking English classes as electives that I worked in secretly and enjoyed. It's not that I didn't take them seriously, but I didn't take seriously the idea that I should study English. And when I went to my MFA program, I realized there were all these books I hadn't read. I feel

like I've been catching up ever since. So that's one side of the story. On the other hand, I don't think I could've written *Inheritance* if I hadn't majored in East Asian Studies. I learned so much about China in college. And I learned the language, which was very important to me in writing the book. I encourage my students to do as many different things as they can, because once they get writing, it's hard to get out to do too many different things.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Many writers have mixed feelings about MFA programs, but coming from an MFA program yourself, what do you think are the benefits and disadvantages to attending one?

CHANG

I don't have mixed feelings about MFA programs. I think going to get my MFA at Iowa was the best thing I ever did. I had not studied writing in college. Reading John Gardner's book, *The Art of Fiction*, a number of times, cover to cover, was the extent of my writing education, aside from a few community courses. So, when I went to Iowa, I felt supported and sustained by the mere fact that I was surrounded by people solely interested in writing. They had given up whatever they were doing, and in many cases traveled thousands of miles, to go to this inland, small-town setting in which writing was taken extremely seriously and there was a long heritage of writing. I think MFA programs can provide shelter and sustenance for people at the right point in their lives. I think sometimes people go to MFA programs too early, before they have time off. And in those cases, an MFA program is like an extension of their college educations. I don't think an MFA program can be appreciated by everybody until they've had a chance to leave school and try to write on their own, which is always a real struggle. So it was wonderful—I learned an enormous amount about craft. I met people who are still my readers. I had two really, really good years.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

I saw that your books have several Iowa professors in the acknowledgements.

CHANG

They matter to me. They still matter to me. When I was at Iowa, each person I studied with taught me something. But I think many people

who go through MFA programs are disappointed for one reason or another, often because of expectations. They go to the program expecting to meet a mentor who will then help them. That was not my experience. What I found instead was that I met a peer group that became very sustaining to my life as a writer. A poet who I deeply admire told me that it's more important for a young writer to see and watch an established writer than for an established writer to see and watch a young writer. In other words, people want established writers to notice them because they think it might be some kind of touch from a world they can then enter. It's actually more important that they watch that person and see how they conduct themselves, the things that they do and don't do, what they do that you wouldn't do. I think that's one thing the MFA program provides. It provides an opportunity for writers in training or aspiring writers to watch and learn from established writers. The learning is not always direct, it's not always someone taking you by the hand; it's often things that you glean. And it's not necessarily what the established writer wants you to glean. I remember going with a professor to a reading at a place the name of which I won't mention, to watch a visiting person of high eminence give a reading, and having the professor explain to me that "this is how not to give a reading."

O'GRADY

A couple stories in *Hunger* have bits of different styles. "San," for example, has a sort of detective story in it, where she's picking up clues about her dad's life. In "Pipa's Story," she's getting stories from the outside world, and there are fairy tale elements to the story. Do you try to try to mix forms?

CHANG

I do try to mix forms. I'm very interested in the tale. The early drafts of *Inheritance* had huge tales in them. I had a whole generation of characters that aren't in it anymore. There was this whole big scene in a gambling house, where this big tale's being told about the evolution of the kiss in lovemaking. This got cut, because, as many readers pointed out to me, it was totally irrelevant to the novel. But it's always been a form that interests me. In terms of the detective story, I picked up as a child that we are born into time after our parents, and the only way we can find out about them, if they don't tell us, is by spying on them. And I think that will constantly appear in my work. I don't see that going

away because it's one of the things that most troubles me, the fact that we're born forward in time and we can't go back and revisit. That really bothers me. I think "Pipa's Story" has some elements of the gothic, which I didn't understand when I wrote it, with the big house and the conflict at its heart and the magical qualities. There are also elements of the tale in that story. I was experimenting, somewhat consciously—just stretching my wings and trying to incorporate different elements of stories I'd heard. In a way, *Inheritance* takes a lot of its narrative thrust and flow from a "low" genre—the made-for-video or made-for-TV movies that a lot of Asian people watch these days. They're often historical, filled with drama, and full of scenes where someone is begging or pleading to somebody for something and they don't get it. You know, the ones with enormous turns of plot, huge, dramatic incidents. I took some of that and consciously put it into *Inheritance*; the way the action is handled is a kind of tribute to popular culture.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

There is a strong point of view shift in the middle of *Inheritance*, when you go from a third-person omniscient to a first-person narrator in Xiao Hong. How do you think zooming in on Hong's first person narrative intensifies the effect of her character? Or more broadly, why did you do that?

CHANG

Finding the point of view was one of the hardest things I had to do while writing *Inheritance*. I knew my material before I knew my narrator, I knew what story I wanted to tell before I knew the narrator, and it took me a long time to understand who would be the best narrator for the story. I never understood, when I was reading the Janet Burroway textbook *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, why she had two whole chapters on point of view, because it seemed pretty straightforward. People are always able to say, "Oh—here's a mistake in point of view," but I realized as I tackled the novel that point of view is more complex and slippery than I understood it to be when I was starting out as a writer. In the novel form—as in the short story, but especially in the novel—point of view is a crucial choice. The difference between writing a novel and a short story is that in a novel, you have to live with your choice for 300 pages. I look at a novel like *The Great Gatsby* and I understand why Fitzgerald chose the first person and why he chose

Nick Carraway as his narrator. But I can also see how that choice, to some extent, dictated so much about the book's form in many of its complicated places, like where Nick tries to relate stories of things he could not possibly have seen. And I find it interesting that even a brilliant book like *The Great Gatsby* can have places where it is hamstrung by its point of view. I knew I had to choose a narrator, and that the narrator didn't have to be a person in the story. But I also knew I had to somehow knit many years together. It was difficult to rely on repetition as a means of knitting the story together, because the story moved from place to place. There were no physical, geographical locations I could use to anchor the story. Look at a third-person epic, such as *100 Years of Solitude*: you'll notice that it takes place in the house, and indeed, García Márquez's working title for the book was *The House*, so that every time he returns to the house, you get a sense of continuity and control of the narrative. You can't do that if you're constantly moving from one place to another. I decided to rely on a person to be the unifying force in the book. Then I had to decide who it would be, and I had the choice of using the main character, Junan, or someone of her generation. Or someone of her daughter's generation. Or someone of the youngest generation, which is what I tried to do first because I had been given an admonition by an editor—not my editor—that I should make someone from America the main character or the book wouldn't sell. Of course, I didn't go with that editor, but it stuck with me; I wanted to create an American voice, but I didn't in the end, because I realized the story encompasses two countries, and that the person who could best tell the story was somebody who had lived in both countries and understood the bridge. Hong was that bridge. But I had to start the book before she was born. So I used the idea of the family story to make it possible to create an opening to the book that didn't include her.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

It didn't feel like an enormous shift in voice, and that's probably because it was the family story, and she could easily have been recounting it.

CHANG

That's right. And I wanted to create that sense of a tale. I think the tone of the book was dictated by the need to fit the third-person and the first-person parts together. And as a result, I learned while I was writing the book how much choices of material and narrator—all that

stuff we learn in beginning fiction classes—have such a huge impact on what kind of object the book turns out to be, what tone it has. I don't know if this is the kind of book I would've written by choice, but it turned out to be like this because of what I chose to write about. That's how I feel about it.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

What do you mean, "by choice"?

CHANG

Well, I mean, it comes across as an epic. Although really I don't know because I can't read it. But I know that I'm perfectly capable of writing a completely different kind of book. But not with this type of material. If that makes any sense. I feel like the material in this book is very different from that in *Hunger*; *Inheritance* has a different tone than *Hunger*, it is an entirely different kind of object than *Hunger* was. I don't have a problem with it, but I'm aware that part of it has to do with what I was trying to write about, the choices I made.

O'GRADY

Are you working on anything new?

CHANG

Last spring I wrote a 100-page manuscript about some poets, but I realized I haven't written poetry as an adult, and I felt I should include some poetry and I couldn't, so I stopped. I'm still thinking about it; I was actually writing about an MFA program, but I thought, "That's crazy, too; who would want to read about one of those?" But I felt it would be best to put that aside for a while and try going back to it later, since I'm still interested. Since then, I've been dealing with changes in my non-writing life: I got married, we bought a place, and we moved into it. That took up a few months. Now I'm working on a lot of the projects I took on after the novel, the ones I took on because I felt my life would be empty without it. I feel that one of them is particularly interesting. It's a landscape dictionary, edited by Barry Lopez, that will be published in a year or so. In the landscape dictionary, forty writers describe 800 American landscape terms.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

What words do you describe?

CHANG

Some of them are quite technical, such as “debris cone.” I’m also doing basic words, such as “harbor” and “Back Bay.” New England ocean terms, it seems to me; they must’ve given them to me because I live in New England. And I got a couple of desert terms, such as “slick rock,” local to Moab and that area of Utah. And some fun terms like “lover’s leap.” There are 52 places in the United States named “lover’s leap,” according to the U.S. Geological Survey, and they all have things in common. One of the interesting things about writing for the dictionary is that I had a struggle—I had to break through my resistance to it—but the struggle was trying to adopt an authoritarian third-person point of view about a subject outside of myself. I had never done that before.

O’GRADY

How long are the entries?

CHANG

They’re about 150 words. And they want us to do them in a “writerly” way. It’s a lot of fun, and I think I’m learning something, but I’m not sure what. That’s the way it is always, though.

O’CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

How would you like to see your career go? How might you like to be remembered as a writer?

[A long pause.]

CHANG

I think what writers really want is to be read. If people continue to read my work, that would be my greatest wish fulfilled. [Another pause.] I’m thinking about this. It’s a really interesting question. [Another pause.] But don’t people all say the same thing? Don’t they say “I want to be remembered as an important writer of the 21st century” or something like that?

O’CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Something like that. But I think it’s especially interesting to ask because you’re young; you’ve got a lot of books left in you.

CHANG

We'll see. I'd like my books to continue to develop in depth and substance. Obviously, I'd also like to write more short stories and novellas. I love different lengths and forms. But I think what I want most is for people to continue to read my work.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

So it's a communication itch with you?

CHANG

I don't know if I'd put it that way exactly, but I think most writers want to be read.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

You say "read," not "liked" or "respected." Is there a distinction for you?

CHANG

No. No distinction. I just want to be read. I don't have very big ambitions at the moment. Well, I'd like to be able to keep going. It's very hard for people to keep going. People say it gets harder and harder as they continue on. But I'd love to keep going. I always had the idea of improving as a writer over a long period. That was always my goal. I never wanted to be a "flash in the pan" or a "one hit wonder" or a prodigy because it can set up disappointment. I always want to continue learning.

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