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THEORY OF TIME AND LITERATURE: A STUDY OF TINA CHANG'S "ORIGIN AND ASH" AND "THE IDEA OF REVELATION"

Keywords: *theory of time; Asian American Poetry; Tina Chang; Origin and Ash; The Idea of Revelation.*

Abstract: *The researcher discusses different theories of time and proposes a hybrid theory in order to investigate the two poems "Origin and Ash" and "The Idea of Revelation" by Tina Chang, daughter of Chinese immigrants and poet laureate of Brooklyn, New York, born in Oklahoma and spent two years of her childhood in Taiwan. I argue that the proposed theory of time can be applied to Chang's poems since she questions current issues in order to solve them and see the future from a new angle. Although time in Chang's poems assumes a straightforward nature that tries either to downplay the past as a separate entity or to stress its impracticability in dealing with present problems, at a deeper level the circular nature of time dominates Chang's inner conflict between her roots and her new identity. "Origin and Ash", from *Half-Lit Houses* (2004), discusses the idea of transience of home which is highlighted by Augustine's three presents. "The Idea of Revelation" from *Of Gods & Strangers* (2011), questions what the past can offer to reform the present and read the future. The analysis of the two poems proves that the proposed theory of time is a suitable lens for investigating the impact of the conflict between past and present, between ethnic and dominant cultures, in solving present problems and shaping Chinese American future.*

A Theory of Time

Many writers have discussed different theories of time such as A-theory and B-theory. One weakens A-theory of time for its focus on presentism highlighting the existing events as present,¹ another proposed a new A-theory of time defending the compatibility of past, present and future and arguing for their accountability for passage, change and truth conditions for temporal sentences;² a third searches for "a stable eternalist theory"³ and a fourth wonders if we really need a new B-theory of time clarifying the point that B-theorists should be satisfied with "semantic atensionalism", the old B-theory, and, therefore, there is no need for a new B-theory,⁴

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¹ See Alexander R. Pruss's "The A-theory of time and induction", *Philos Stud* (2011) 152:335–45.

² Jonathan Tallant. "The New A-theory of Time", *Inquiry*, (2015) 58:6, 537-62.

³ Dean W. Zimmerman. "The A-Theory of Time, The B-Theory of Time, and 'Taking Tense Seriously'", *dialectica*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, (2005) 59: 4, 401–57.

⁴ Francesco Orilia and L. Nathan Oaklander. "Do We Really Need a New B-theory of Time?", *Topoi* (2015) 34:157–70.

since it “fails to provide a complete account of the truth and falsity of tensed sentences.”⁵ This paper is more concerned with the theory of historical time and philosophy-based theory of time. I propose a theory of reciprocity of time and life, with time’s three main divisions, as a necessary reference to life in as much as life is a subscriber to time. Time treasures a history of life and life feeds time back. Within this reciprocity, in which the present, the future and the past replaces each other cyclically/vertically, the history of human beings lies. The theory I propose both cuts through and veers away from theories mentioned above.

Theory of Historical Times

Reinhart Koselleck and Helge Jordheim hold that conceptual history needs a theory of historical times (Jordheim 1). Koselleck not only had a close look at the historical concepts, but he also looked at them from a wider perspective. He, moreover, exerted efforts to understand the meanings of these historical concept into their contexts. Both Koselleck and Michael Foucault supported the idea that a theory of historical times is basic to historical discourse analysis. However, Jordheim argues that conceptual history (historical semantics) studies have recently been disinterested in the theory. She criticized Koselleck’s theory which, if seen as a theory of modernity, occupies a short time in western history. Therefore, Jordheim proceeds, conceptual history’s development depends essentially on a divorce between it and time. Jordheim refutes the previous proposition when she sees that conceptual history is in need of Koselleck’s theory because Koselleck solved the “linguistic predicament, the combination of the synchronic and the diachronic, structure and change” (Jordheim 25), regardless the fact that she saw it was only Foucault who studied this predicament better in his *L’archéologie du savoir* (Jordheim 27). Defending himself against critics who saw that he is not interested in change, in *Les mots et les choses* Foucault sees the importance of diachronicity and change lies in the “sudden rupture” that separates historical periods. Moreover, in *L’archéologie du savoir* he asserts that time is there as a marker of the beginning and an end of an event, which shows that he does not see time as an effective tool of change unlike Koselleck.

Koselleck tripartite structure of studying the differences between language and history, viz., metahistorical, history and language in context and experiences resulting afterwards (Jordheim 30), supports his claim that a theory of historical times is necessary. Structure and synchronicity are key terms in order to understand the relationship between the theory of historical times and conceptual history (Jordheim 31). He proceeds to make it clear that: “in actual language use or action there is no way that the diachronic and the synchronic can be kept apart empirically.” Any events or action unfolding in the present depend on conditions in the past as much as they depend on wishes and plans for the future (Jordheim 32). Basic to his theory are two concepts: diachronic structure and synchronicity of the nonsynchronous. The term “structure of repetition” enables him to further explain how something experiences change through time but remains the same (Jordheim 34).

⁵ Stephan Torre. “Truth-conditions, truth-bearers and the new B-theory of time”, *Philos Stud* (2009) 142:325–44.

Jordheim concludes her essay stressing the applicability of conceptual history to a “wide range of discourses” and fields, the so-called material turn (40) which I approve of. Throughout the article Jordheim seems unable to decide which part to side with: the necessity of a theory of historical times for conceptual history or the vice versa. However, the conclusion redefines her attitude as she clearly supports the former rather than the latter.

According to Riegle’s modernist vision of history, the present and future is linked to the past through the idea of development. Meaning and significance are given to the event “based on its position in the developmental chain”. Riegle’s “historically specific conceptual framework” controls the process of linking the past to the present and future, is not inherent in the past but is based on “perception of the social and cultural world” (Gubser 457).

Philosophy-Based Theory of Time

Based on Bergson’s and Deleuze’s philosophies of time, Al-Saji proposed “a theory of time in which the relation between past and present is one of coexistence rather than succession” (203). She sees that the past has repercussions for memory and intersubjectivity (211). The relationship between the past and the present, one of virtual presence and accompaniment, as Al-Saji understands it (215-6), does not fit for studying the influence the past of the ancestors hold on the offspring since it is spatial and temporal, elements that mark the past as a distinct entity reflected in the present. Bergsonian intersubjectivity, if widened enough to include a real bridge between the past and present, not merely a virtual memory, will break new grounds in race study in terms of historical linearity, viz., tracing the influence of past predecessors on the present. Al-Saji maintains: “In my view, it is this interpenetration of pasts, the virtual coexistence of planes of pure memory, that forms the ground for intersubjectivity in Bergson’s account” (226). Contrary to Al-Saji’s conclusion (229-230), there is no contradiction between the idea of a past that has a separate entity and interacts with the present and a past whose influence is crystallized in the present in such a way that the present may be shaped by it.

Known as the first thinker to give serious attention to time (McGrattan 659), St. Augustine’s theory of the human subject depends on time. For Augustine, eternity and time have no common basis since time exists as a creature, as well as human beings, has a beginning and an end. To solve the problem of a past and a future which do not exist, Augustine speaks of

three present tenses, all of which ‘coincide by the grace of the mind’. Whilst the present of things present can be said to exist in the now, the present of things past and the present of things future exist as ‘objects of intellectual perception’. The past exists in the memory as ‘images . . . fixed in the mind like imprints as they passed through the senses’. The future exists in expectation as pre-existing concepts which can be seen as if already present to one’s mind. (McGrattan 660)

The trilogy of time lies in the “now”, the “memory” and the “expectations”. It is there in the memory that time is measured and these past memories are made present by recollection. Augustine referred to temporal measurement of time which is

carried out by the soul. The temporal philosophy of Augustine is hermeneutically unlocked by tolerance. “It is tolerance which inverts – or at least, suspends – time’s *distentio* and makes possible forgiveness” (McGrattan 662).

The Proposed Theory

The theory the researcher proposes is a hybrid one composed of theory of historical times, philosophy-based theory of time and other elements taken from these theories discussed above. In this theory time is a context for the events. Time evolves and revolves successively. Al-Saji’s proposed theory of time, based on the coexistence of past and present, supports evolution and revolution of time which is reflected in the analysis of the two poems. Koselleck’s and Foucault’s concept that historical times is basic to historical discourse analysis is modified and applied to the discussion of the below poems. Foucault’s time is used as a marker and subscriber to the events in the two poems. The relation between Koselleck’s diachronicity and synchronicity supports the circular nature of time and show how events in the two poems which unfold in the present are related to the past and may suggest future plans. Riegle’s developmental chain holds good here. Koselleck’s “structure of repetition” accounts for Asian Americans’ relations to their roots and native countries despite hyphenated identities they have obtained in the United States of America. A widened scope of Bergsonian intersubjectivity functions as a lens through which ancestors’ influence can be traced in the two poems. Augustine’s concept of three present tenses is basic to the analysis of the relations between the then, the memory, the now, the present, and the expectation, the future, in the two poems.

Tina Chang & Asian American Literature

The conflict between resorting to the past, to time as memory, or veering away from it by locating one in one’s present predicament dominates Asian American literature. In her PhD dissertation Sharon Kristen Tang-Quan, focuses on the image of Utopia and hope cherished by first generation immigrants and crystallized in the works of the first generation of Chinese-American writers such as Lin Yutang, Li-Young Lee, Nieh Hualing, Ha Jin, and Wang Ping (xiv). She aims at reaching a wider scope of investigation of representation of hope in the ethnic US (xv). She touches upon the issue of “roots more linguistically than historically or culturally. It is only when she discusses “The 1993 *Golden Venture Tragedy*” and “Angel Island detainment poetry” that she sheds light on the transnational problems of uprootedness, in-betweenness and deferral of the Chinese-American Dream (302-3).

In her PhD. dissertation, “Identity, Locality, and Chinese American Literature”, Yuan Shu maintains that Frank Chin and other editors exerted efforts in giving definition to Asian American discourse and calling and propagating for an Asian national project that would create an Asian American tradition distinct from Asia and white America. However, the project was criticized for containing contradictions and for being masculinity-biased (42-3). Ironically enough,

rather than critiquing the function of the American West in U.S. culture and society, Chin develops a geopolitical hierarchy in his literary work, which sexualizes the

American West as masculine and desirable, Chinatown as emasculated and miserable, and China as feminine and despicable, a hierarchy which mirrors the Orientalist division between East and West. (Shu 53-4)

Chin's depiction of Chinatown as such comes as a result of exclusion and racism. Moreover, "China represents the feminized construction which has been imagined and perpetuated in American popular culture" (Shu 62).

Shu's comment on the consequences of the national project led by Chin and other editors shows a tendency to sever Asian Americans, defined as the sixth and seventh generations who were born and brought up and lived their entire life in America, from Asia. She argues that Asian and Asian Americans are only united in their critiquing of US institutional racism and imperialism (Shu 64-5). Tina Chang's poems shows a similar conflict between sticking to present situation or resorting to past memories in order to find a solution. The problem of Asian immigrants, Chinese, Filipino...etc., is not fully represented. "Asian immigrants still constitute socially excluded and politically silent groups in the United States, as several politically conscious writers have attempted to reveal" (Chae 66).

Talking from a literary and academic point of view, in her essay "Reading for Asian American Literature", Colleen Lye maintains that Asian American identity is imaginary:

Like all identities, Asian American identity is imaginary, except only more so. It makes a fanfare of its catachrestic nature, which has to do with the fiction of pan-ethnicity. A historicization of the imaginariness of Asian American identity—rather than the strategic suspension of the recognition of its characteristic imaginariness—may be our best hope for intellectually conserving the category (484).

She argues that Asian American literary history must be realized since it is essential in "the institutionalizing of Asian American social reality" (485). She points out that Asian American literature is politically tintured and its advocates, mainly from teachers and academics, assume the role of spokesmen for the pan-ethnic group and influence university students in particular. For this reason, "from the beginning of the Asian American Movement college campuses were a main arena of pan-ethnic identity construction" (486).

In the introduction of his book, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature*, Christopher Lee makes it clear that his aim is to study the relationship between the individual and the conditions surrounding him/her taking identity as a means of conceptualization of such relationship (2). Later on, he stresses the fact that discussing Asian America necessitates tracking the transformation of concepts of identity and difference:

Not only does Asian America change through time, but, as I suggested in earlier chapters, it also engenders prosthetic temporalities that mediate the abstract passage of time by providing access and giving form to the past and the future. These temporalities in turn produce a myriad of material and psychic effects that permeate Asian American politics and culture. (150)

In Chang's poems, time is the means through which identity is subtly conceptualized. The poet's struggle for situating herself in her present time, in realizing her present identity away from the past is a struggle between two identities: "the Chinese" and "the American". This Chinese American identity is underrepresented and not much talked about.

As a minority, Chinese Americans may identify themselves with Jewish Americans. In the introduction to her book, *Crossing Cultures: Creating Identity in Chinese and Jewish American Literature*, Judith Oster maintains that there is no book before hers that was written on two ethnic groups together such as Chinese-American literature and Jewish-American literature. "I know of no book to date that has featured two groups, specifically Chinese and Jewish Americans" (9). This is an indication that Chinese American literature has not sufficiently been discussed. Underrepresentation and marginalization have unconsciously been reflected in Chinese Americans' writings so much so they focus on the Americanness of their identity more than the undesired Chinese roots. In Chang's "The Idea of Revelation" time as memory is fit only for an unconscious repose, a catatonic state where all conscious relations with the world are cut for a while.

In his PhD. dissertation entitled "The Literature of Chinese American Identity" Guicang Li states: "Chinese American identity can only be located in literary representations" (v). This shows the importance of literary studies on Chinese American identity. Hybrid identity has much been discussed by novelists such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Frank Chin and Shawn Wong as well as poets such as Li-Young Lee and Marilyn Chin (147). Both poets highlight memories of home and the history of the family. Time as succession is very essential to their work since they see the past as a main formulating factor of their identity which contains present and future. Chinese American poets should aim at making up for cultural loss and, at the same time, redefining their identity.

Commenting on the practice of "the privatization of poetry" discussed in Juliana Chang's essay, "Reading Asian American Poetry," Li sees that lack of critical interest in Chinese American poetry results from this kind of privatization which makes poetry incapable of addressing political, ethnic as well as social issues (148-9). Asian American poetry, Li argues, is largely marginalized since "about a dozen essays" (149) have been written on it. Li thinks that Chang's proposed "alternative reading" of Asian American poetry, a reading from a perspective that is neither purely Asian nor dominantly American, "is not a complete break from the two dominant readings as she wishes to critique" (150). I partly agree with him in that it combines features of both, but, at the same time, it produces a new understanding of such poetry, though based on hybrid concepts.

In the last chapter of his thesis, Li discusses the dominant theme in Chinese American poetry, viz., the quest for subjectivity and identity (151). Such a quest revives self-consciousness and enhances resistance against dominant ideologies and cultures. The conflict between the ethnic and dominant cultures results in not personal experiences as it seems but in collective ones referring to all Chinese American people as people of the wrong color (neither white nor black). The two poems by Tina Chang discuss this conflict with a more focus on present identity.

Though born in Oklahoma in 1969, Tina Chang, aged two, and her brother were sent to Taiwan after the death of her father who was suffering from liver cancer. (Gootman). She returned to the US and got an MFA in poetry from Columbia University. Being elected Brooklyn poet laureate in 2010, Tina Chang is keen on demystifying the role of the poet and bringing poetry to the ordinary people.

Chang wrote in a simple, yet emphatic style and her poems are written in stanzas and in prose. In fact,

she writes in many styles to prove the uniqueness of humanity and to appeal to all audiences, rather than just one... Her prose poems remind readers of the flow of life and the story-like shadow attached to it. The stanzaic poems dramatize the rigidity of life and tend to discuss the darkness of the human mind and intentions. Her style appeals to the course of human life, as it ultimately seeks to imitate it. ("Modern Poet Project")

For her, poems take the physical structure of a house. She states what she aims for by writing poetry: "I write in order to capture what is no longer there... So, in my imagination, I constructed a permanent place where I could live even if the moments were fleeing" (Chang, "Why I Write"). Creating an imaginary/virtual storehouse for memories is reflected in the transience of "home" represented in "Origin and Ash" and futility of the past discussed in "The Idea of Revelation". The official presence of time, the clock time, is disfavored by Chang while Augustine's time with its three presents may host Chang's "permanent place" between its interstices.

"Origin and Ash"

Tension between the past and present appeared in Chang's debut collection *Half-lit Houses* in which the cycle of time is somewhat disturbed, since the poems "seek familial and historical bonds while longing to sever them" (Talpos). The title of the collection is symbolic as it refers to the transience of home, illustrated in each poem. In fact, the poems "reconstruct the poet's fractured past—a place of fragility and volatility, to be revisited with utmost care" (Talpos). Such a house is not a home to settle as it is not expected to furnish the settler with warmth, complacency and familial atmosphere.

Half-lit Houses is divided into four sections, each of which begins with opening lines illustrating the theme of the poems under it. "Origin and Ash", which appears in section one that revolves around Chang's past, shows a struggle against the past attempting at denying its power in reshaping the present. The opening lines show us that the present is situated in a past context which illuminates the reader's understanding of the speaker's life and future expectations, despite attempts at severing the past from the present:

Powder rises from a compact, platters full of peppermints,
a bowl of sour pudding.
A cup of milk before me tastes of melted almonds.
It is the story of the eve of my beginning. (Chang, "Origin and Ash")

The visual image crystallized in “powder” and the gustatory image in “sour” and “melted almonds”, though meant to illustrate the transience of the past, construct a bond with the speaker’s roots, sour and melted as it may be.

The visual image that combines different scenes, illustrating transience, starts with the speaker as a baby, then as an adolescent and reaches a scene of two conflating fires: one resulting from the burning house and the other from sexual desire.

I am in bed imagining great infernos.

Ashes skimming my deep lake.

The night the animals burned,

I kissed the servant with the salty lips.

There was a spectacular explosion, a sound

that severed the nerves, I was kind to that shaking. (Chang, “Origin and Ash”)

The experience of burning was paralleled by another sexual one, both are short-lived and exciting; but the former is abhorring while the latter is interesting. Putting both experiences in juxtaposition highlights the temporality of the event yet stresses the presence of time as memory and the memory of the present time.

The transient nature of the poem cannot stop the speaker’s search for her past which is: “described as “toothless” and without faith, her unburied dolls become embodiments of her past condition as well as her present. She is both “plastic, worn cheeks grinning” and has a fantasy of red ants feeding on the dolls. The speaker becomes both the subject who unburies the past, and the object, the past she unburies” (Talpos). “When we unburied the dolls, red ants were a fantasy/ feeding on them, nest of veins, shrunken salted corpses” (Chang, “Origin and Ash”). The past symbolized in the unburied dolls is there but the "red ants" have erased most of it. This image of an unrecognized past stands in contrast with the first word of the title "origins". However, the last word "Ash" enhances the message the image conveys: the origins have turned into ash, untraceable. It is not a coincidence to have these things colored in red: "poppies", "ladybugs" and "red ants". The past, seen in "shrunken salted corpses" has been bleeding from time immemorial. The visual image of the gifts anticipates the destiny of the "unburied dolls", a reference to the past.

The speaker should focus on the present: “*Keep fires inside yourself.*” However, it is a "mythology", a "sin". The implication is that though all circumstances push one to focus on the present, it is not good to sever relations with one's past since present will soon be past. Events function within Augustine’s three presents. Ironically enough, the speaker emphasizes severance with the past by recalling an incident from the past: being a baby left to face its destiny in water till it was almost dead. The incident stresses the present as the sole important situation for her life: "since then, my eyes were open windows, /the year everything fell into them" (Chang, “Origin and Ash”). Here Chang departs from Al-Saji’s theory of coexistence between the past and the present, Koselleck’s contextual times and try to reside in interstices of Augustine’s time where Foucault’s concept of time as marker is also a subscriber to Chang’s attempts at severance of past from present.

The sound of "cicadas", though just a hissing, is a strong alarm that ashes are befalling everyone. It recalls the sound of horses at the beginning of the poem which was taken as an alarm of the fire. The speaker builds up a system of sounds which

stresses her alertness as well as restlessness that makes the speaker retreats in an impenetrable shell. A future fire looms in the air as "The streets are arid, driven toward fire"(Chang, "Origin and Ash"). The symbol of fire intertwines with time trilogy and places them interchangeably before the reader.

The poem closes with a circular image of time with past, present and future intermingled. The speaker will dance with her father, already dead, on condition that she hurries up. The present situation of a girl hurrying up despite rainy earth and the irritating clicking of the slippers, is contextualized in the future, using "will", which is based on a past reference, her father. The fire, anticipated in the previous lines as an immanent future action, is now a past reference put in contrast with the last image of "a thin layer of rain". Time as succession is seen in the sequence of fire and rain. Time revolves around the speaker's life incidents and evolves into present, past and future circularly.

The whole poem reconstructs time as memory, a memory that can refer to past, present and future actions within its spheres and the recollection of which shapes even the presentiment as well as the present. The two words in the title respectively construct two opposing images of time: time as eternal and time as transient. However, the reconstruction of time as memory out of the two images subscribes to the idea of severance of time as duration and time as context: the speaker's life time shows the duration of time but actions of her life should be contextualized in historical time.

“The Idea of Revelation”

Of Gods & Strangers constructs a transpacific history and reflects on the past in such poems as “The Idea of Revelation”, “The Empress Dowager Contemplates Her Lineage” and “The Empress Dreams After a Poisoned Meal” (Review Fiction). This collection, published in 2011, “explores the concept and malleability of time” (Pagliaro). Time as entity is not perceived through temporal division, neither is historical events divided by times into single units. Rather, it is “a mystical and vivid collection of poems that brings her readers into the continuous state of history, lineage, and time, finding its continuity in words” (Pagliaro).

The title “The Idea of Revelation” is ironic since the message of the poem is: leave the idea of revelation and search for other down to earth ideas/solutions to your present situation. Seen through Augustine's concept of time, the poem's events cuts through the three presents focusing on the presentiment that hovers over the scene. Depressed as the poet may seem, she clings to mundane ambience making revelation a human rather than a divine attribute. The negation in the opening lines is a point of departure. Chang drags the reader's attention to the will of the individual that can change the depressing situation crystallized in a woman, a symbol of fertility, who stands ready to sow seeds:

In her grasp, the shine that is seed,
that is beginning. She will work
the earth, bounty in the vault
of cosmos above her, heat
lightning that lassoes in its manic
current.... (Chang, “The Idea of Revelation”)

Malleability of Time is perceived as the image highlights the present skipping past memories. “Seeds” mark the “beginning” and the vegetative image crystallizes time as succession, a product made by the individual who shapes his present and plans for his future. However, according to Augustine’s theory, the present contains past. The succession takes a circular nature. This succession develops and at the same time is developed by the woman’s tillage of the earth and the visual image in “lightning” and the tactile one in “heat”, both crystallized as a lasso, enhance the effort exerted by the woman to reach a revelation of her own. However, this image of fertility and growth is immediately counterbalanced by another one of destruction and possible death that looms on the horizon. This apocalyptic vision with man portrayed as saboteur stresses an image of two antithetical facts: life and death represented by the present and the past which are perceived interchangeably, stressing the circular nature of time. The action of sabotage and death referred to in “bayonet to bomb” marks the end of the cycle of life and heralds a revelation which is not religiously but secularly based. This idea of revelation supports the concept of time as progression since the events revolve into intersecting cycles of past, present and future, which convey a sense of continuation.

Time as progression is evident in the process Chang uses in writing poetry and even in the editing of already written poems. In an interview she maintains:

I don’t think poems are ever finished. I have been known to cross out words and add lines to my books of poetry. If I am not happy with a line before a reading, I’ll gladly edit the text in my book so that I’ll feel comfortable reading it to an audience. Text and language is alive so it’s always changing. To me, there is no end point and that is a joy. (Chang, “A Conversation with Tina Chang”)

Chang’s idea of revelation in writing poetry depends on evolution and progression of time which ipso facto affect a change of the written text. That’s why she keeps editing printed versions of her poems, which are marked by clear differences, till they are ready for publication.⁶

⁶ In an email I asked Chang which version I should depend on while analyzing her poems.

Dear distinguished poet,

As I could not get the two volumes *Half-lit Houses* and *Of God and Strangers*, I downloaded the two poems under study, *Origin* and *Ash* and *The Idea of Revelation*, from the internet. I see a difference between the two attached versions of *Origin* and *Ash*. Please, have a look and tell me which is the reliable version. I attach the idea of revelation, so please tell me if it is reliable too. Awaiting your reply. Sincerely, Yasser

She answered assuring me that poems printed in her two above mentioned volumes and those on poetry foundation website are the revised versions.

Dear Yasser,

Thank you for your question. The Poetry Foundation is a reliable source. As for the two versions you see, it was often that I changed my poems quite significantly between publication of a version in a literary journal and final publication of my book. I sometimes change aspects of the poem before I read a poem. The versions that you see on the Poetry Foundation website come from my final book.

For Chang the Chinese past can sometimes be seen a point of departure, a push forward into Bergsonian intersubjectivity. While writing *Of Gods & Strangers*, Chang was measuring her individual experience against the collective one and discovered that clinging to the past, to the figure of Empress Dowager, would give her an opportunity to express her feelings easily and confidently and to search for solution in the past for present problems. The two circles of time intersect with a flip backward and forward in order to build a strong bond between past and present: “By reaching back to this historical figure and distant first person, I found my footing, and with that power I felt an ability to unleash what I was feeling about our current American and transnational dramas” (Chang, “A Conversation”). The past as a separate entity does not concern Chang; rather, it is the “current American and transnational drama”, the Chinese American situation that occupies her mind.

In the “Idea of Revelation” time is a symbol of both life and death in life. The poet’s ability to make a choice, to change her life and move forward is governed by feelings which is time controlled: “You stop the clock in your paltry chest. /The one that says choose, choose” (Chang, “The Idea of Revelation”). The metaphor that makes a clock of the poet’s heart stresses the importance of time/swinging in time. However, the audible image that amplifies heartbeats as if they were clicks of a clock which symbolize life and energy is downplayed by stopping the clock in an attempt to freeze time, to enter a state of catatonia.

Despite the catatonic state of the poet, time ticks by and what was present is past now. Time as memory colors the speaker’s attempt to hold on to the past: “Wind that desired backward. Ring/the alarm. When you wake, no more/pain. A mirror like a window looking out” (Chang, “The Idea of Revelation”). The clock-heart metaphor extends into these lines with the audible image of winding backward in order to escape the present situation into a reverie. This dreamy meditation is interrupted by another audible image created by the ringing of the alarm. Back to her senses, the poet had already overcome her problem which is now a memory that flashes upon her inward eye, her mind, like a mirror, a window.

Time is very important to the understanding of the poem. Utility/futility of time is questioned by the poet. Commenting on Chang’s use of the circular nature of time, Mary Howe, a poet and a teacher, says: “Tina Chang is writing to the future, from the past towards the present, and all the way back again” (“Tina Chang”). The clock metaphor still controls the poet’s thoughts. She unsettles the image of the past as a storehouse of memories which one clings to in time of distress: “What can your past now say to you/that has never been said before? What/of that clock that forbade you to move/forward” (Chang, “The Idea of Revelation”). The speaker harps on the idea that time as evolution changes into time as memory: present actions are merely reproduced into past memories. Swinging back into the past subverts time as

Thank you for your question and thank you again for focusing attention on my work.

Sincerely,

Tina Chang.

(Chan, Tina. “Re: A Paper on You.” Received by Yasser Aman, 15 Mar. 2019.)

Chang is well aware of the impact of time as progression, as succession and as memory on her work.

succession since one cannot “move/forward”. The implication is that the speaker urges her listeners and readers to look into their present problems and find solutions to move forward into the future.

The speaker goes on questioning her listener extending the clock image in a synecdoche in “minutes” portrayed as a ship careened for maintenance only: “What of the clock that asked/for nothing but passage, the minutes/careening into you like a fitful arrow” (Chang, “The Idea of Revelation”). The hypnotic image of “a fitful arrow” enhances the dreamy reverie and the state of catatonia the speaker/listener enters. For the speaker the past is a rest house, not a storehouse of memory which she may visit in search for a solution. “What of the clock that summoned nothing, /not even mercy. Once you tired of wanting, /a face to break, you started the clock again” (Chang, “The Idea of Revelation”). Time as memory provides an escape from the present problems but does not suggest a way out. For the speaker, resorting to the past is not effective since it is devoid of any supportive memory. It fits only for a hideout, a period out of our conscious time.

Chang’s innovative idea of revelation reveals a lot about her unconscious: connecting to the past is important since it is healthy to one’s wellbeing. For the poet the past does not function properly within the sphere of the present. Chinese immigrants may be more discriminated against if they admit such longing to the past ancestors. However, Chang herself resorted to portray past figures in order to express herself. This shows the conflict between a desire for thinking and living in the present as Asian/Chinese American and a desire for maintaining a strong bond with one’s roots.

Conclusion

It is clear that A and B theories of time are out of the scope of this paper and the hybrid theory based on historical time and philosophy is used in analyzing the two poems. Koselleck’s and Foucault’s concept of historical time as basic to historical discourse analysis subscribes to the discussion of the two poems: Foucault’s idea of time as marker is developed into time as a marker and a subscriber to events. In the two poems mentioned above events are marked and affected by time as a structure and a context. Koselleck’s “structure of repetition” has accounted for the strong ties Chang in particular and Asian Americans in general have with the roots, the origin which can never be ash.

The discussion shows the importance of Al-Saji's proposed theory of time, based on the coexistence of past and present as it supports evolution and revolution of time in the poems. Riegler’s developmental chain has been proven useful in understanding the concept of time as succession. The common experience Chang tackles in her poems can be shared through Bergsonian intersubjectivity. Viewed by Augustine’s lens, Chang’s treatment of time as a creature has been highlighted. In *Origin* and *Ash*, she unburied the past which is an inseparable part of time which contains the three presents mentioned above. The interchangeable nature of Augustine’s three presents stresses its importance in shaping the future.

Asian/Chinese American literature shows a conflict between ethnic and dominant cultures, between the past and memories and the present situation. The

analysis of the two poems prove that Chang's individual experience in searching for intersubjectivity and identity is both influenced by her present situation and is a representation of all Asian/Chinese American people.

The discussion of "Origin and Ash" illustrates the conflict between the past and the present, memory and transience, and home and the imaginary place Chang established in order to live there and catch fleeing moments. The discussion of "The Idea of Revelation" through Augustine's theory of time has proven the malleability of time with the past and present perceived interchangeably. Differences between the past as a separate entity that refers to clock time and present actions that have become past stress the meaning of revelation Chang discusses, a revelation that provides a solution to the present situation of Chinese Americans. The conflict between the poet's desire for representing ethnic culture and for solving problems and melting in the dominant one is best investigated through the proposed hybrid theory applied to the two poems.

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