

*Wheels of Change*  
Chusien Chang

Three basic concepts underlie the art at the Chinatown Station: commemoration of the involvement of Chinese immigrants in the construction of railroads in the west; recognition of the diverse ethnic populations that live and have lived in the area around the station; and *I-Ching*, the traditional Chinese Book of Changes. Chusien Chang translated these concepts into artistic forms on the station's ground-level plaza, mezzanine, and platform. Shaped by railroad tracks in an octagonal pattern on the floor of the north side of the plaza are the eight trigrams of *Ba Gua*, the foundation of *I-Ching*. Also embedded in the plaza floor are 64 ceramic pavers, each with a different hexagram, that together make up all the transformations embodied in *I-Ching*. The placement of the pavers was assisted by students at the nearby Castellar School. After Chang passed out pavers and told the students involved in the project what each meant, they indicated on a drawing of the plaza where they wanted them placed.<sup>1</sup> There are also two aluminum benches on the plaza, each with backs embellished with images representing different ethnic groups that have lived in the area. One bench represents the Latino population by having a Mayan calendar enclosing a Mayan figure carrying the symbol for time. The Chinese symbol for longevity on the other bench represents the Chinese. The station's mezzanine has what Chang calls an "I-Ching dial." A 3' diameter compass at the center of the 16' diameter composition is a reminder that the Chinese invented the navigation tool and is a reference point for Gold Line passengers. Moving outward from the compass are four rings of different material, each divided into 64 sections. The corresponding sections of the rings say the same thing in different languages. The ring closest to the compass has an English text, the next ring has inlaid Chinese characters, the third ring has the *I-Ching* hexagram symbols that are replicated in the plaza-level pavers, and the outer-most ring has the numerical equivalent.<sup>2</sup> Two aluminum benches are the only art element on the platform. The image on the back of one refers to the Croatian community by having the seal of St. Anthony's Croatian Catholic Church in front of the Croatian flag.<sup>3</sup> The church, though located in Chinatown, continues to serve the city-wide Croatian community. The other bench represents the Italian population with a ring of grapes circling a picture of Casa Italiana, which is on North Broadway and can be seen from the station. By selecting images on the four benches to represent different ethnic groups, Chang wanted people to know that "Chinatown is not just for the Chinese, but there are other communities that are active there."<sup>4</sup>

The concept of *I Ching* that Chang incorporated into the station, is a divination system created 2,500 years ago. Known in English as the Book of Changes, *I Ching* was edited and annotated by Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and is considered the most important text in Confucianism. The foundation for *I-Ching* are eight *Ba Gua* trigrams representing the elemental forces of nature: fire, earth, lake, heaven, water, mountain, thunder, and wind. Each trigram gives rise to eight six-line diagrams known as hexagrams which in total symbolize the 64 stages of transformation in *I-Ching*.<sup>5</sup> As applied to the Chinatown station, *I Ching* has eight elements: 1) changes—transportation, community, social; 2) constant movement—movement of the train, flow of pedestrian traffic; 3) predictable but uncontrollable natural forces—predictable is the train schedule, and the unpredictable is the delays and breakdowns; 4) permutable combinations of the *Yin* and *Yang* giving a combination of 768 different hexagrams—catching a train at different times of the day, different days of the week; 5) synchronicity of events in time and space—

arriving at the station just before a train, or meeting a friend at the same time on the station or in a train; 6) cyclical and transitional state of a journey—the journey of a passenger; 7) ever changing cycle--the changing character of Chinatown; and 8) universal values--a monument to Chinatown encoding the richness of Chinese American culture.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in late 1992 and continuing until the early spring of 1993, community meetings arranged by the Community Affairs office of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) were held in Chinatown to inform the public about the proposed light rail line between downtown Los Angeles and Pasadena. These meetings were followed by additional meetings organized by Metro Art, the department at the MTA responsible for administering the agency's public art policy. At the Metro Art meetings, people were invited to participate in the art creation process by joining the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) that was being established for the Chinatown station. During the summer of 1993, the CAC drafted a Community Profile and then elected two members to the five member artist selection panel. On September 27, the artist selection panel held its first meeting and reviewed slides of the artists who were in the Metro Art's Artist Registry. Chang was considered by the panel because she had earlier submitted material to the MTA after seeing a flyer about the registry.<sup>7</sup> At their first meeting, the panel compiled a short list of artists who were further evaluated at their next meeting. On October 1, the panel narrowed the short list down to five finalists and on October 15, after interviewing the finalists, Chang was selected to be the artist for the Chinatown station.<sup>8</sup>

When she began working on the station, Chang wanted two concepts in her installation: commemorating Chinese immigrants in American history by referencing their labor in building and maintaining railroads in the west; and acknowledging the importance of *I-Ching* in Chinese culture and its influence on western thought.<sup>9</sup> According to Chang, the goal of her installation was to “address the historical development of Chinatown through an overlay of Eastern and Western cultures past and present.” Initially, she proposed a 25' high circle fashioned from railroad tracks to memorialize Chinese immigrant involvement in the construction of railroads. The circle was also to serve as a traditional Chinese symbol of the gateway to heaven, a window for the landscape behind it, and as an orientation dial connecting east and west. The foot of the circle was to have a 25' diameter base made of railroad tracks. Embedded “on the surface of the base” were additional railroad tracks forming the eight trigrams of *Ba Gua*. The plaza was also to have pavers inscribed with descriptions of the 64 hexagrams of the *I-Ching*.<sup>10</sup>

Chang's goal of incorporating *I-Ching* influenced Kevin Peterson, who was hired as a consultant after two architects from the firm of Lamb and Associates, which was responsible for the station design, left the project. Peterson built on Chang's concepts by designing a canopy over the platform that captured the essence of one of the derivative elements of *I-Ching*, the yin and yang. He proposed a canopy constructed on one side with metal to create a sense of hardness and curved glass on the other side to evoke softness. He also designed a sculptural piece for the plaza that was shaped like a hand-fan using poles that formed trigrams.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of 1995, when work ceased on the station because of unresolved issues concerning the pedestrian linkage between the station and Chinatown, Chang's design consisted only of the elements for the plaza: the vertical ring, a horizontal ring, trigrams within the horizontal ring, and pavers. However, during the “containment period,” which began in late

1995 when construction on the entire rail line stopped because of cost over-runs and lasted until 2001 when construction resumed under the newly created Pasadena Blue Line Authority, two things happened that impacted Chang's installation. First, the station was designated a "Landmark" station which brought additional funds to enhance the design.<sup>12</sup> Second, a series of community meetings were held that generated input regarding a variety of aspects about the station. Though the community input did not directly result in changes to Chang's design, it did result in changes to the station's design that impacted her installation. The meetings began with two MTA organized community workshops in November 1996 and continued with additional presentations before business and civic groups in Chinatown.<sup>13</sup> As a result of the community input, the station was redesigned to give it a more traditional appearance. In addition, a Feng Shui Master was hired, who after evaluating the station design, made suggestions that resulted in some additional changes.<sup>14</sup> Chang also sought advice from a Feng Shui Master on the placement of the trigrams, who told her that embedding the trigrams in the plaza floor was acceptable.<sup>15</sup>

Also during the containment period, Alan Nakagawa from Metro Art organized a unique Youth Art Project involving 275 students in grades 3 and 4 at three Chinatown elementary schools-- Ann Street Elementary School, Solano Elementary School, and Castellar Elementary School.<sup>16</sup> He developed the project as a way of connecting children to the light rail line, teaching students about station design, creating an opportunity for children to visualize the station, opening a door to a possible career, and showing the entire Chinatown community what the station could look like.<sup>17</sup> Students in the three elementary schools designed stations and the best designs were displayed in the lobby of the Gateway Center on April 18, 1997.<sup>18</sup> Though the project helped strengthen community support for the light rail project, it did not result in changes to the station's final appearance or to Chang's installation.<sup>19</sup>

After Chang was rehired for the project in 2001, she had very little contact with the station's architects, Gensler, because they had essentially completed the station's design.<sup>20</sup> Gensler responded to community input by designing the station with a more traditional appearance than the one Peterson had developed. For the new station, Chang retained the twin concepts of *I-Ching* and memorializing the Chinese immigrants who built the railroads of the west. She also added the concept of recognizing other ethnic groups who live and have lived near the station. Translating these concepts, she proposed installing stone benches on the station platform, moving the 25' vertical dial that had been planned for the street-level plaza to the mezzanine, and reconfiguring it into a horizontal piece with a raised ring of railroad tracks for sitting.<sup>21</sup> She also proposed the pavers and the octagonal pattern of the railroad track-shaped *Ba Gua* trigrams be kept in the plaza. However, she wanted to replace the descriptive text that were in her pre-containment proposal for the pavers with numbers ranging from 1 through 64 to correspond to the hexagrams of *I-Ching*. Responding to plans to make the plaza a community open space for public events, Chang proposed installing three stone benches, a picnic table with four seats, and stones etched with Chinese proverbs in the area.<sup>22</sup> Chang also considered designing decorative Chinese pots, banners on a bridge that was planned to connect the station with Chinatown, handrails, and a trash container looking like a bronze Chinese urn.<sup>23</sup> By the summer of 2001, Chang had finalized her design. The numbers in the pavers in the plaza had been replaced with hexagrams and for budgetary reasons, the stone benches on the platform and plaza were replaced with aluminum benches. The octagonal pattern of the *Ba Gua* trigrams formed with railroad tracks remained embedded in the plaza floor but the raised ring of railroad tracks around the

mezzanine *I-Ching Dial* was removed.<sup>24</sup> In late 2002 and early 2003, the four aluminum benches were fabricated by Carlson and Company and the pavers and the *I-Ching Dial* were fabricated by Mission Tile.<sup>25</sup>

Though it strengthens the symbolism in the station, the replica on the south side of the plaza of one of the five 2,000 year old bronze *Yong* bells unearthed in the mausoleum of Zhao Mai in Guangzhou, China in 1983, is not part of the public art program. This bell was given to Los Angeles in commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sister City Agreement between Guangzhou and Los Angeles in 2001 for installation at the Chinatown station.<sup>26</sup> But because the Gold Line had not opened, the bell was temporarily installed at the Cathay Bank on Broadway before it was moved after the station was dedicated on May 17, 2003 to a spot where it was isolated from Chang's work.

Chusien Chang was born and raised in Brazil, and received her BA in 1979 and MFA in 1984 from the University of California, Los Angeles. She was originally a performance artist and now focuses on public art, with installations in Manhattan Beach, and Shanghai, China. Her works incorporate industrial materials, mechanical components and architectural forms to define temporal and special relations. Her work has been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Barnsdall Art Gallery, Armory Center for the Arts, and other galleries in Southern California.

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<sup>1</sup> Chusien Chang, interview by Michael Several, December 29, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.; Fax transmittal from Chusien Chang to John Rawlings, re: Shop Drawing for Stone Compass, February 27, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The I Ching concept as Applied to Chinatown Station, November 8, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Alan Nakagawa to Chusien Chang, October 15, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Memo from Chusien Chang to Chinatown Station Design Team, re: Art Concept for the Chinatown Station, December 20, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Chinatown Station Art Concept, Chusien Chang, January 10, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.

<sup>12</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.

<sup>13</sup> MTA Media Advisory, MTA to Hold Workshops Seeking Community Input on the Design of Pasadena Blue Line's Chinatown Station, November 8, 1996; MTA Memo from Alan Nakagawa to Chi Mui, Jan Perry, Richard Alatorre, Renee Quinn, Adeline Yoong, Vibiana Yung, Janet Lim, Mike Lee, Jim Bickart, re: Chinatown Station Design Process, December 3, 1996; Memo from Alan Nakagawa to Kathryn Lim re: Community/Design Schedule, January 27, 1997; MTA Memo from Alan Nakagawa to Jan Perry, Richard Alatorre, Renee Quinn, Adeline Yoong, Vibiana Yung, Janet Lim, Chi Mui, Guadalupe Duran, Mike Lee, Jeri Okamoto-Floyd, Jim Bickart, re: Chinatown Station Conceptual Design Presentation, February 25, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Nakagawa, interview by Michael Several, June 6, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Alan Nakagawa to Martha Figuerroa, Jon Stoll, Mrs. Wanda Jung, Dore Wong, re: Youth Art Project Grades 4, 5 & 6, December 5, 1996; Media Advisory, MTA, Professional Design Team to Draw Inspiration from Drawings of Future Chinatown Blue Line Station Created by School Kids, January 27, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Nakagawa, Op. Cit.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Alan Nakagawa to Martha Figuerroa, John Stoll, Chuck Choi, re: Friday, April 18, 9-11 AM, April 2, 1997; Nakagawa, Op. Cit.

<sup>19</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.

<sup>20</sup> Chang, Op. Cit.

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<sup>21</sup> Drawing by Chusien Chang, May 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Meeting Minutes, KW, re: Chinatown North and South Plaza Meeting, July 12, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, op. cit.; Meeting Minutes, Kiewit/Washington, February 26, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Chinatown Stations Specifications 35% submittal, prepared by Chusien Chang, August 21, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Proposal/Contract for Design Development and Fabrication of the Chinatown Station Benches, from Carlson & Co. to Ms. Chusien Chang, Septemberr 26, 2002; Contract from Chusien Chang to Mission Tile, no date.

<sup>26</sup> Lesley Elwood, interviewed by Michael Several, August 28, 2008.