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## **Local Worldmaking Through Little Dragons for a Better World: A Case Study of a Intercultural Community Building Project**

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**Abstract:** This article presents a case study in grassroots aesthetic education as world-making within a diaspora Chinese community in the United States. This experimental education acted as a pedagogy of resilience in the face of the pandemic and its revealing of structural injustices. For American-Chinese and Chinese-American students, this education provided a way to understand themselves as inhabiting multiple identities, a re-orientation urgently needed in the context of politicized U.S.-China relations during and after the pandemic. Encouraging creativity and the arts as methods to bridge identities and communities, Little Dragons for a Better World also established new pathways for resource sharing and care relationships. The article situates this education in theories of activism drawn from Grace Lee Boggs, Angela Davis, Wangari Maathai, Urmi Basu, Hu Mama, Thich Nacht Han, Arundhati Roy, and Giovana Di Chiro, orienting community-building at the local scale as a revolutionary practice.

**Keywords:** American-Chinese and Chinese-American activism, glocal, grassroots education, syncing up, community-building, resilience

In the summer of 2020, I had just graduated with a liberal arts college degree, and like many others, was set ablaze with the feeling that *the* revolution needed to happen *now*. My education gave me the tools to analyze and understand the intersecting crises of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, and climate

disaster and the global pandemic seemed to only prove to us all how the systems of the old world are broken. Suddenly it felt absurd to continue with what seemed to be logical or 'normal' next steps. What is looking for a job in a world that has systems that are so destructive and broken? What is aligned with my values and also useful to the multiple crises happening all at once around me? What makes sense in a senseless world?

I found myself gravitating towards books and scholars taught in my environmental justice professor Giovanna Di Chiro's classes: amongst them were Grace Lee Boggs and Angela Davis' reverberating voices. Perhaps I found solace in the fact that they, too, studied philosophy, and they too felt the urgency of the revolution. Boggs famously asks, "What time is it in the clock of the world?" And, to me, this was a pivotal question. I realized, then, that it was not the time for me to fret about my ego. Indeed, Arundhati Roy's prescient article, *The Pandemic is a Portal* sheds light on how much the world was already changing. She said: "We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it" (Roy, 2020, p. 1). Amidst racial tension, worldwide grief, and personal uncertainty I realized that the revolution *was* happening now, it was already underway and it was up to me to take it upon myself to live my life in the way of the world that I want to help build. Worldmaking was not a metaphorical concept anymore, as a student who already graduated from college it was necessary that I built the world I believed in.

With the help of these writers and thinkers, the answer for me was to bring happiness, creativity, peace, and most importantly, co-created actions that reflect these values in the day-to-day, local community. Roy states in her book *The Cost of Living*, that it is now the "time of the small," that perhaps there is a "god of small things" looking down at us. She states this by saying that for too long our world valued projects that were "big" and full of "big ideas" but those projects would fail with no accountability, citing the dams in India (Roy, 1999, p. 1). Real change happens on the scale of the small, the unseen, and often unnoticed. These thinkers gave me the courage to find immense value in teaching at a small scale, and to create the project Little Dragons for a Better World. This article provides a case study of this project, its results, and a brief analysis of the importance of community-making at the local level. It is deeply inspired by Grace and James Boggs' "Detroit Summer" project which was briefly discussed in her book *The Next American Revolution*. "Detroit Summer" is a multi-racial and intergenerational collective that empowers local youth through arts and co-creation to improve their local communities (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012, pp. 105–34). Little Dragons of a Better World has a similar mission, centering Chinese American and American

Chinese families (CA-AC) living in the Swarthmore Wallingford areas in Delaware County, Pennsylvania.

## 1. The Time in the Clock of the World

In 2020, the issue of Chinese and Asian hatred in the US became apparent. As stated by Hung et al., “Anti-Chinese sentiment increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting as a considerable spike in overt violence and hatred directed at Asian American individuals (p. 1).” It seemed that what used to be latent racism, especially in comparison to the racism directed towards black and brown bodies, became for the first time an overt one. Indeed Asian racism often is in the strand of micro-aggressions instead of overt aggression (Lee, 2022). The issue was a wake-up call to many. Asian Americans are often considered a "model minority" in the United States and also often accepted in general society. This has led to many Asian Americans being less aware, interested, and involved in social justice issues. Oftentimes, Asian Americans feel the need to internalize a choice between their Asianness and Americanness, and many feel that they identify completely with the American system and values. Most of the time CA-ACs are understood as those who "put their head down and work on their lives" 過自己的小日子 (a common saying amongst Chinese communities). Thus, in 2020 it was particularly powerful to see a wave of Asian people coming together in solidarity. In this essay, I will also specifically look at CA-AC. Oftentimes, Asian Americans are lumped together, but most Asian people feel much more connected to their specific ethnic heritage than the general pan-Asian label. Indeed, as seen in Pew's data, most Asians think of this identity as only something to "check a box" and identify more closely with their ethnic heritage (Greenwood, 2023). In 2020 it was the Anti-Chinese sentiment that was spearheading the racist comments, as led by the president of the United States of the time. It is hard to forget how the previous president continued to speak about the "Chinese virus" and the "Wuhan disease", in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anti-Chinese sentiment however did not simply spring up overnight, rather it has been brewing for decades. The pandemic was a catalyst that brought it onto the surface like an oil spill on water. It floated on top and stewed up violence, confusion, and latent anger and frustrations. The president at the time was simply spewing views that quietly brewed in many people's minds. China and the Chinese culture have been pitted against the US and US values for a long time. In my undergraduate work, I spent much time delineating how the media has carefully created the narrative of China as the imposing other (Pan, 2010). Indeed, on the world stage, China has time and time again been publicly humiliated by the US, whether it is public shaming about human rights or environmental rights, or actual political stamping on the global stage like in the United Nations. Most of the time,

the narrative is superficial and not interrogated further, for example, most of the environmental problems stem from factory work that is creating products for the US's capitalist industries, and most people seem to quickly associate China with ethical issues (Pan, 2010).

As a Chinese-American myself I saw in my community of CA-AC how this tension causes a rift within the family and personal interaction within the nuclear family. The tension of holding cultures that are not only different but often pitted against one another with an inherent power dynamic causes personal tensions and the splitting of the self. As Freire (2010) says in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when the oppressed are in structures of learning environments that internally view them as the oppressed:

[The oppressed] are one at the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice of being fully themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent; castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take account" (2010, p. 47).

Indeed on the world stage, China has continuously been oppressed, and this rift between the two cultures causes this kind of division within the children of the community living in the United States.

The question then is how can one be both American and Chinese in a time where there is not only conflict and power dynamics that interplay between the nations, but also a seemingly ethical conflict between the two cultures. Chinese and US values seem to not only be politically unaligned but also have inherently different sets of values on how to live life. Oftentimes children of immigrants are much more Americanized than their parents, causing internal conflict in the home. I saw how the children who were attending schools, who were living in America, were internally divided, constantly castrating their own culture and language. Children would dismiss their parents, and parents would find it more difficult to communicate with the children. Further, there are few examples of people who can balance their identities, and interestingly enough, many Chinese Americans who then become American diplomats, such as Gary Locke, are then shamed by Chinese communities as traitors (Kamen, 2021).

To circle back to the original question, about the clock's face, I saw the need for CA-AC communities to celebrate Chinese heritage as well as integrate with American justice and societal issues. How can we balance these identities that seem to be so different from one another? In an ideal world, where the Chinese American identity is not simply a Chinese American who is simply Americanized but can celebrate their heritage and have a cultural set of values that is understood and accepted. These questions were the bedrock of this project.

## 2. Hope in Aesthetic Education

The question that naturally follows the identification of the problem, is the methodology for the solution. At the time I had just begun tutoring and teaching small classes on writing and poetry. This was something I started doing in 2016 when I had an internship with New Light, an organization that worked with the women and children of the red-light district in Kolkata. Amid the crisis, this gave me hope. To see young minds express, dream, and believe in humanity despite what felt like a dark time gave me tender light. One of my students, in writing about COVID wrote this: "Hope may have not been found/ but that doesn't mean hope is not around... No matter what is happening/ Whether we are in a pandemic or when we are separated/We are connected/Like tree branches" (Diaz, 2020). At the tender age of 11, she was already encouraging the world, already seeing our interconnections, already trying to take in the pain and soothe the worries of others. To me, this gave me the strength that fueled my positivity as well.

It dawned on me that the power of teaching writing and poetry or teaching art in general, was that students not only receive a skill or knowledge but also be given a space to situate themselves in the web of relations in the world. The true power of education is for students to have the space to discover and deepen their understanding of the self in relation to the world. One of the largest propagators of aesthetic education and its power is 蔡元培 Cai YuanPei (1868-1940). He was a Chinese politician and the most influential Chinese educator: he was the first Minister of Education in the newly formed Republic of China in 1911. He studied philosophy, aesthetics, and experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig, Germany before returning to this position. He is heavily influenced by Kant, Hegel, and especially Schiller who "argued for the centrality of aesthetic education in the healthy development of both society and the individual" (Lal, 1984, p.). Cai believed that "beauty" represented the key not only to general well-being but also to a triadic model of historical progress- in a lineage akin to Hegel's dialectic of absolute idealism—from the physical to the aesthetic to the moral. He was also deeply influenced by American philosopher John Dewey's *Orders Objective for modern education*. Dewey, who was a Hegelian, espoused an organic view of society in which an individual's measure is linked to his or her performance in and

for society. Indeed, Cai's thinking came at a time when China was in deep distress, reeling from a revolution and the failed first Sino-Japanese war. "The system of education within such a view would be an expression of the highest form of Hegelian reconciliation, identified metonymically as an Absolute" (Lal, 1984, p. 31).

Cai's famous line is 以美術代宗教 "aesthetic education as a substitute for religion" (Pan, 2012). In China, religion was commonly thought of as the reason why Europe was more advanced. Chinese people are not religious but are extremely ideological. Aesthetic education proved to Cai to be the true road to creating free individuals; free to know themselves and their interests, free to pursue what was necessary for them in relation to their society. He wrote, with many similarities to Hegel and Schiller: "We must follow the general rule of freedom of thought and freedom of expression, and not allow any one branch of philosophy or any one tenet of religion to confine our minds, but always aim at a lofty universal point of view which is valid without regard to space or time. For such an education I can think of no other name than education for a world view" (Zhang, 1990, p.134). To provide a space for students to freely express themselves and also to give them prompts that give them the bedrock to find this "world view" was thus also a key ingredient to this project. Just like how the "Detroit Summer" centered art and co-creation as part of its methodology, I realized that creativity and the arts were needed to develop this bridging of identities.

Thus, in developing Little Dragons for a Better World, I saw that the central part of celebrating and reifying Chinese heritage for the kids was through creativity and storytelling, co-creating, and co-building. The development of this "worldview" rests on the ability for students to expand their understanding of the self as one of multiplicity and that needs to happen with sharing the arts. Furthermore, it was central for me to see in this development of worldview, and possible worlds, was my role as a Chinese American who grew up in China with a college education from Swarthmore. I realized that my language skills, cultural background, and my understanding of how to synthesize cultures are something that the children in the community do not have examples of, and it was incremental that I could be a teacher that led by example. Thus, the project was created bilingually, inclusive of the parents and the intergenerational language barrier. Most importantly, the event hoped to teach the value of not only celebrating the self, but also caring for the community; as Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "[the] mission [of] teachers are not just to transmit knowledge, but to form human beings, to construct a worthy, beautiful human race, in order to take care of our precious planet" (Hanh et al, 2019, p. 22 ).



### 3. Little Dragons for a Better World Mid-Autumn Festival

The first event was in celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival, in 2022. This was sponsored by both the Peace and Justice Studies Association as well as the Asian Pacific Islander Political Alliance (APIPA). The event was entirely advertised on the neighborhood WeChat group, a social media platform that is distinctively used by Chinese people and communities.

During the first section, children listened to a story of Skywoman, based on Robin Kimmerer's introduction in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Skywoman is the Native American story of the founding of this land. The reason I chose this as the opening story was because I thought it was important to connect first with the land that we were in. Around 30 children participated and worked on their gratitude chain.



Children listening to the story of Skywoman.

The parents were led into a workshop on creating an ideal community poster. APIPA led this workshop so that they could state what a good community looked like. Parents gained more connections, learned about the local APIPA organization and their initiatives, such as the "Save Chinatown Project", as well as experiencing the local college campus. Afterward, there was a show put on by students from Swarthmore College as well as community members, including

Taiko, the Erhu (traditional Chinese instrument), and an exercise in the use of the Nunchucks.



Parents doing the idea community activity led by APIPA



Students learning the Nunchucks from a local father.



Finally, there was a dinner sponsored by APIPA, with food provided by a local restaurant. During this dinner, there was a bilingual performance of the story ChangE and HouYi, the story that is celebrated during the Mid-Autumn Festival. The storytelling was accompanied by a Chinese/Indian- American dancer who used Bharatanatyam dance to accompany the story's events, again allowing the community to expand their worldview ([link to performance](#)).



Over 100 Community Members Eating Dinner Together

Overall, the event was a great success that led to strengthened bonds, formed new connections, and established a sense of trust. The next section will go over what kinds of bonds have been created, and how this relates to the creation of intercultural peace and resisting dominant structures.



Little Dragons for a Better World Mid-Autumn Festival Event 09/10/2022

#### 4. “Worldmaking on the Ground Up”<sup>1</sup>

The event led to new connections, deepened trust, and the beginning of a project that is self-sufficient. The strengthening of a community is creating a deeper sense of relations that leads to more support, more sharing of resources, and more sharing of knowledge. Though this is happening on a small scale, its implications and happenings are aligned with the values and ideals set by the revolutionary thinkers in the environmental justice movements and social justice movements. To reimagine the world and create a decolonial, environmentally just, anti-capitalist future is often to venture into the realm of speculative fiction. Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble* gives us a view of what this new world could be. In the section labeled "Camille Stories: Children of Compost" Haraway delineates the story of five generations of symbiogenetic beings, who have connected with other creatures such as the monarch butterfly. The intergenerational communities live in deep connection with one another, and without much separation from nature (Haraway, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> This term was borrowed from Giovanna Di Chiro's forthcoming book *Worldmaking From the Ground Up: The Praxis of Environmental Justice* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

What does this vision look like in praxis? In some ways, CA-AC and all immigrant identities are like symbiogenetic creatures, living within two worlds, two palettes, and two tongues that are vastly different from one another. Like Camille in the stories, there is a stitching together of biospheres, the melding of life forces. There is a newness to the identities formed in the liminal spaces, and connection and celebration are instrumental in creating solidarity, and also in creating a sense of identity. Although the actual internal shifts within the families such as views on community and views on identity have yet to be assessed, the most notable effects are more connections, friendships, and relations leading to more sharing of resources. For example, there is an elderly couple who began a farm in their backyard, naming it "Happy Farm." They were farmers when they were back in China, and they came to be with their granddaughter. However, due to language barriers, they found it difficult and boring to live here so they began Happy Farm as a way to stay connected with the community. They grow Chinese vegetables that are hard to find in the supermarkets here, such as 絲瓜 loofah melon, and 茭白筍 white bamboo shoots. During the event their contact and information were spread across, giving them many more customers and connections to share their vegetables with. As Boggs states "We must be practicing in the social realm the capacity to care for each other, to share the food, skills, time, and ideas that up to now most of us have limited to our most cherished personal relationships" (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012, p. 47). This caring relationship when it comes to sharing is one of the most radical and important steps in creating a new world, and in educating the youth about what can be possible.

Further, it became more common for neighbors in the area to invite one another to dinner, to help each other get groceries, and to share things like educational resources and books. These interactions are happening on a day-to-day basis. However, because more interactions are occurring there are also more conflicts and more arguments happening as well, and Little Dragons hopes to continue building a neutral space so that the community can come together.

Perhaps most excitedly, many families decided to donate monetarily to the next event and were extremely willing to help. Thus, for the next event, there was no need for an external sponsor. For the dinner families all brought homemade food and shared in a potluck style. For the show children performed piano, singing, and karate and even one student shared doing his Rubik's cube live. At one point all the parents came up to sing a shared song that the Chinese community knows, a moment of true belonging and co-creation. Further, there is a renowned violinist named Zhou Xiaofu who gave a free performance for the community. Now mothers have begun to volunteer their time to help plan the next one. Melissa Miles co-author of *Ecofeminism* wrote that true consumer liberation is "self-sufficiency, co-



operation instead of competitiveness and their diversity, belief in the subjectivity of not only human beings but also non-human beings, commonality instead of aggressive self-interest, creativity instead of the 'catching-up-with-the-Joneses' factor that is responsible for much superfluous consumption in our societies and to find satisfaction and joy in one's work and life" (Shiva & Miles, 2014, p. 254). From food to time, to looking after each other's kids, to material resources, the community is connected and frequently helps one another out. This fabric of trust is built one friendship at a time, and the Chinese community is quite intimate. Seeing the intergenerational interactions, children and parents and friends gathering in more frequent and normal spaces have been a glimpse into a hopeful future.

When it comes to empowering an intercultural community, it is important to acknowledge the politics of space. CA-AC families have been forming relationships before the events of course, but it had always been within the margins. With our second Little Dragons event, we had the endorsement of the town's mayor, Martin Spiegel, and we had the opportunity to host the event at the historical local community center, Park Avenue Center. What once felt underground, connections formed mostly in liminal spaces in each other's private spaces, were able to come to shared public spaces. The hope is now the community knows that they *do* have a space to celebrate themselves within the fabric of their local community, a true intercultural mingling. There is much to continue with this project, much to explore, and much to grow from. There can be more connection with local organizations and more actual work to be done with local issues, but this article hopes to shed light on a small intercultural educational program happening at the grassroots level, with values that resonate with a global mission.



Little Dragons for a Better World Winter Gathering 12/17/2022 at Park Avenue Center



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