

**Hanmin Liu**

President & CEO, Wildflowers Institute  
California, United States

*Reflection Paper – Pathways to Peace: Defining Community in the Age of Globalization*

**Introduction**

Wildflowers Institute is a social innovation lab whose mission is to understand how communities work and to help them be self-sustaining.

I have been involved in development work all my life. In 1980, the institute coordinated a bilateral exchange program involving some four hundred American and Chinese professionals in health and education. Over two decades, this program worked closely with the Chinese government's Ministry of Public Health, major academic medical centers, municipal public health and education agencies, universities, K-12 schools, and after-school institutions.

Since 1996, I have been serving as a trustee of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. I mention my association with Kellogg because it has had a very important influence on my understanding of development. The foundation introduced me early on to the idea that there is an inherent power in communities. This notion prompted me to make a conscious shift in my work at Wildflowers toward understanding this power and learning how to help nurture it along so that communities can be self-sustaining and resilient.

For the last thirteen years, Wildflowers Institute has developed a series of relationships with ethnic, indigenous, and racial communities, and I have been their student, learning from them about their power.

**Lessons from Research and Experiences**

The most important lesson that I have garnered from my experiences to date is that development work starts not from a program perspective such as health, education, or water management, but from seeing rural villages and vulnerable communities as a living ecosystem. This living ecosystem has a self-

organized infrastructure, or basic organizing unit, that functions in and adapts to the economy of the times. The strategy for development should strengthen this infrastructure.

A function of the organic infrastructure is the transmission of culture. Culture, the manifesting of human intellectual achievements regarded collectively, is one of the community's richest assets, and it need not be dismissed as irrelevant to the economy. The value of the culture lies in its power to form the social fabric of communities. Environmental peacemaking must be grounded in these points of view.

A small village in northeast Spain, Ibieca, illustrates these points. Over the course of twenty-five years, Spain's economy shifted from an agrarian to a market economy, prompting the village to adopt new social and environmental practices. Professor Susan Friend Harding conducted a study of this village in which she showed that from 1950 to 1975, "the villagers of Ibieca unwittingly refashioned themselves and their world as they carried on what they experienced as life as usual . . . they participated willingly in social processes that dispossess them of their preindustrial cultures simply because they are unaware of what is at stake."<sup>1</sup>

One of many examples of the unwitting changes is the women's relationship to the village washbasin and with one another. The village architectural structure and water system were formed around the notion that water returned to the land that it came from. Harding describes the water system as follows: "The village fountain drew water from an underground stream through five iron pipes. Villagers filled jugs, pails, and barrels from the pipes for household use; the runoff flowed into a trough used to water work animals, and then into a large square stone basin where women washed clothes. The runoff from the washbasin was channeled into an irrigation system, which in turn channeled the water through the village gardens."<sup>2</sup>

Women in the village played a vital role in circulating information in such a way that they held the community together, within and among families. This sharing of information happened around the village washbasin, where the women would routinely gather to wash clothes. Such conversations would also happen in bread-baking, sewing, and knitting circles.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Friend Harding, *Remaking Ibieca: Rural Life in Aragon under Franco* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

But when the women purchased washing machines and when a bakery and a general store opened in Ibieca, the frequency of collective action and engagement reduced significantly.

There is the need to surface and make explicit the cultural assumptions and behaviors that reinforce social connectedness and improve social health and safety in communities. This should be an ongoing process within communities and between them and environmental peacemakers. This is especially important at a time when societies are transitioning to a global economy.

Anthropologist Hsiao-Tung Fei made this observation: “Human behavior is always motivated by certain purposes, and these purposes grow out of sets of assumptions which are not usually recognized by those who hold them. . . . It is these assumptions—the essence of all the culturally conditioned purposes, motives, and principles—which determine the behavior of a people, underlie all the institutions of a community, and give them unity. This, unfortunately, is the most elusive aspect of culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Had the villagers of Ibieca been conscious of the women’s role in weaving the social fabric of their community, they might have continued the circles of engagement and collective action while also adopting the washing machine. The Ibieca culture would not have diminished and become extinct.

This year Wildflowers Institute undertook a detailed analysis of its thirteen-year documentation in seven communities of color and found an organic infrastructure surfacing in every one of them. Guided by the beliefs and values of the community, this infrastructure is composed of informal leaders, socially bonding activities, and social spaces. The following illustration comes from our work in a migrant community in Ningbo, China—a port city two hours south by train from Shanghai. In the video clip at <http://www.wildflowers.org/china-anhui-street.html>, you will see migrant workers describing their self-organization and their approach to dealing with significant tensions between the old residents of the community and themselves.

Informal leaders are the weavers of the community’s social fabric. They work almost entirely in the informal sector. They are concerned elders, spiritual and cultural leaders, and other highly regarded community members who have taken it upon themselves to bring families and friends together. The elders provide guidance and direction. The spiritual and cultural leaders organize ceremonies and rituals.

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<sup>3</sup> Hsiao-Tung Fei, *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), pp. 81-82.

And the respected community members offer their help and support. Informal leaders hold six characteristics in common:

- They have a long track record of dealing successfully with all kinds of pressing issues.
- They are recognized for their good deeds and are trusted and well known by most community members.
- They are invisible to outsiders.
- They are modest and do not seek personal media attention or political positions.
- Their role and authority are created by the community without external mandates.
- They are motivated to help others and not by monetary gain.

The social spaces in a community are geographical locations that are defined by groups of people and hold special meaning for them. Spiritual leaders, elders, cultural artists, organizers, women's and men's groups, and others hold rituals, ceremonies, gatherings, and events in various social spaces. Many of these activities happen inside homes, in backyards, on street corners, in parks, on porches, outside on a schoolyard, in restaurants, and in other community spaces, bringing people closer together. What is important is that in many of these spaces, something generative and special emerges. These activities serve as a centripetal force to bring others in. The collective action around shared values and beliefs is reaffirming and powerful. Some activities in social spaces serve to heal people while other activities strengthen intergenerational relationships and social connectedness. Still other social spaces transmit cultural knowledge and practices, and nourish and energize members of the community.

The Filipino youth in South of Market, San Francisco, claimed Sixth Street as their space. The video clip at [www.wildflowers.org/filipino.html](http://www.wildflowers.org/filipino.html) shows a Wildflowers session that we held with a group of Filipino youth describing their community. This model was built from a consensus among the young people. We see how they define who they are, what people and institutions are important to them, and the social spaces that are invisible to others, but that they claim as their own. Making visible these invisible spaces

leads to recognition of the importance of these spaces in the neighborhood. This recognition, in turn, helps everyone see the young people's point of view.

### **A Case Study on the Social Impact of Spiritual Ceremonies**

In the 1980s five thousand Iu Mien came from the highlands of Laos and settled all over Northern California. After their arrival, they began to organically build their diaspora community. They organized themselves in a community structure that mirrors that of the different villages they came from in Laos. They adapted their traditional leadership structure of village chief and spiritual leaders to guide community members. They constructed a community center for cultural preservation and community festivals. They also used their homes for ceremonies and for family mediation.

The Iu Mien are always mindful of the presence of their ancestors and spirits, using ceremonies to align themselves to the spiritual world. A group of Taoist grand priests and shamans actively helps community members with maintaining balance between the material and spiritual worlds. These spiritual leaders are held in very high regard, both for their spiritual powers and for their virtues and moral standing in the community. When the need arises, the family invites a shaman to its home to conduct a particular kind of ceremony. The whole family and its friends are involved in the spiritual event, which varies in length from a few hours to several days, depending on the ceremony. During these events, everyone present sees the home as a sacred space.

With support from Fetzer Institute, Wildflowers has been studying the difference that the Iu Mien spiritual infrastructure makes in the lives of community members living in the San Francisco Bay Area. The goal of the study is to uncover and capture deeply rooted spiritual beliefs, cultural practices, and implicit premises that bring people together in the community.

A small group of Iu Mien leaders and youth carried out a series of interviews with family members and spiritual leaders to understand the social impact that the Iu Mien shamans have on individuals and families. The interviewees reported that when they participate in one or more ceremonies, they experience some form of spiritual healing. They frequently describe a notable difference in their physical and mental well-being following a ceremony.

But the Iu Mien research group also discovered that there are other important benefits to holding ceremonies. First, the frequent occurrence of a ceremony preserves and transmits deeply held cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices from one generation to the next. Second, ceremonies and traditional festivals are the only events that different generations and the extended family come together around.<sup>4</sup> Generally, thirty to forty people are involved in a ceremony, but sometimes over a hundred family members and friends attend. Third, ceremony builds social capital among different families. The research group noted that the organizing of a ceremony involves men and women preparing certain kinds of foods in a certain way. And given the number of people attending a ceremony, this food preparation over several days becomes a major undertaking. It is unreasonable and likely impossible for one family alone to carry out all the responsibilities involved in a ceremony. Here, the research group discovered an implicit understanding among families about the importance of reciprocal help. This expectation serves as a unifying factor that encourages others to actively contribute time and energy to help a family holding a ceremony. Helping in the cooking and the organizing of a ceremony results in greater social engagement and social bonding among different families.

The observations and findings of this research team led us to conclude that spiritual beliefs and practices are essential to the social cohesiveness of the Iu Mien family. The degree to which Iu Mien spirituality remains relevant to the younger generation is vital to the social fabric of the community. (Additional research needs to be carried out to assess how the Iu Mien community makes its spiritual beliefs and practices relevant to the younger generation and how the community defends itself against the disruption caused by certain Christian groups.<sup>5</sup>)

Our studies in the United States, China, and elsewhere abroad reveal that recognizing the growth of the organic infrastructure in communities is the missing half to development work. This infrastructure weaves the social and cultural fabric of communities. The infrastructure incubates the values to protect, nourish, and heal the community. It provides the underpinning for young people and adults to be a

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<sup>4</sup> It was customary for the entire Iu Mien family to sit down together at dinnertime. But Iu Mien elders are now complaining that the younger generation eats dinner in front of the television instead of around the table with the rest of the family. Therefore, we were particularly interested in learning that ceremonies do in fact bring together intergenerational family members as well as the extended family.

<sup>5</sup> A major challenge in the Iu Mien community at large concerns the influence of Christian missionaries and more specifically the aggressive outreach of certain denominations. At issue here is the missionaries' point of view that spirituality comes down to the individual and her or his relationship to God. Moreover, the requirement set forth by the Christian denominations is that to become Christians, the Iu Mien must burn their ancestral registrars, which date back nine generations, and their traditional relics.

productive force in their family and in society. It draws on the accumulative experiences of generations of people and takes that wisdom to a higher level.

When this infrastructure is strong and vibrant, we see growth of communities. For example, the leaders of the Lao Iu Mien community report that after being in the San Francisco Bay Area for nearly thirty years, over 80 percent of the community's families are now homeowners. The Iu Mien community raised funds from within and recently built a Taoist-Buddhist temple in East Oakland, the first of its kind in America, as yet another strategy for preserving and strengthening its spiritual beliefs and practices.

But when this infrastructure is weak and diminished, a culture of violence and destruction prevails. In a weak community culture, individuals and family members are overwhelmed by negativity and unable to come together and defend their beliefs and values. The way to correct this toxic tide is to help communities return to cultural basics.

### **Barriers to Overcome and Questions to Ask**

The most significant challenge in environmental peacemaking is having a comprehensive framework of social change that mirrors different social realities and the culture of communities. In this paper, I offer the organic infrastructure as the organizing unit for community security, sustainability, and growth in a global economy. This infrastructure is the main entity that can build an interface between community and national and international organizations dedicated to the protection of the environment in times of armed conflict and to cooperation in development. How this infrastructure preserves its assets and adapts and grows its functions in contemporary times is the essential factor in development.

In the building of this interface, the question to be asked is what are the terms of the engagement that leverage the inherent power in communities. For national and international agencies, one of the underlying premises of development work is that institutions are the primary entity of social and economic production. Another premise is that nation building is inherent in development. These two premises are often at the core of strategies for environmental protection work. However, in many if not most villages and communities facing with environmental degradation and armed conflict, their power comes neither from their government nor from institutions. Instead, it comes from families, clans, and tribes. Furthermore, we have observed that when communities subordinate their power to an external power, there is a greater likelihood that they will eventually revolt or implode.

The work of environmental peacemakers is right at the nexus of change where these terms are being defined. What capabilities peacemakers bring to their work, whom do they deal with, and on whose terms are some of the main factors influencing their effectiveness in peacemaking and development.