

# A Cross-Cultural Training

**This summer a first-ever program tried to teach a group of grantmakers about the nuances involved in funding nonprofits that serve Asian and Pacific Islanders. Here's how it went.**

**BY PAM BURDMAN**

SAN FRANCISCO, July 23–25—In the beginning it felt like so many other meetings of foundation people. About 60 people gathered in a windowless room in a downtown hotel, wearing the requisite name tags with the host organization's appealing but opaque name: Wildflowers Institute.

But from the moment the rumbling of Taiko drums brought the crowd to silent attention, it was clear this was not intended to be an ordinary meeting. During the next 48 hours, participants would view a community design reminiscent of the Starship Enterprise, receive the blessing of Cambodian Buddhist monks, play with colored blocks and plastic figurines and learn about a special Han-dynasty mirror in which a viewer sees not just her reflection, but also her own heart.

Welcome to Studies 2000, a study tour designed to help representatives of local, regional and national foundations deepen their insight into Asian and Pacific Islander (API, for short) communities. "Our role is to illuminate, to amplify what is powerful, what is beautiful and what is important in

these communities and to incorporate the lessons learned into our grantmaking," Wildflowers' energetic President Hanmin Liu told the crowd over dinner as the show began.

The inspiration for Studies 2000 was a symposium organized by Kellogg National Fellows last year at Cal Poly Pomona highlighting the difficulty foundations have in understanding the diversity of API communities. Struck by the need to bridge that gap, several community leaders approached Liu, a Kellogg trustee who had been doing U.S.–China cross-cultural work for more than 20 years.

"The idea was to bring in trustees, senior executives and program directors from each of the participating foundations," said Kellogg CEO William Richardson, who lent his support early on. "We thought that would bring some ferment back to the foundations. We also hoped it would strengthen collaboration among the foundations." As grants trickled in from ten local, state and national foundations, including Kellogg, the Wildflowers team spent close to a year preparing for

Studies 2000, getting to know five API communities in a series of focus groups. (Because I speak Chinese and have written frequently about Asian immigrants, I was commissioned to write vignettes about community members for the project, giving me a window into the Wildflowers approach to translating culture; *FN&C* asked me to sit in on Studies 2000 and describe how it went.)

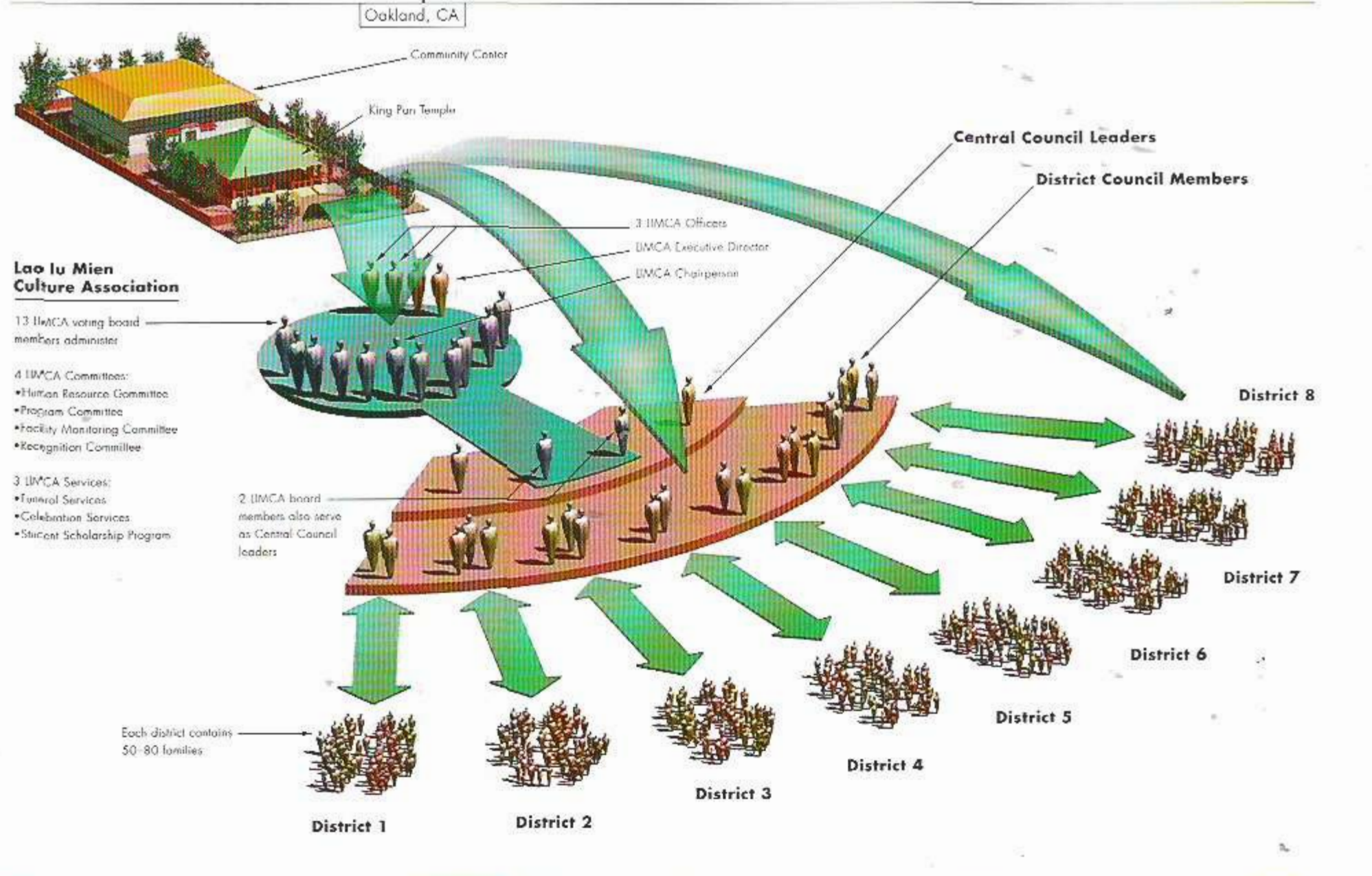
There are plans and some initial funding to do a Studies 2001 in Los Angeles, which will include Vietnamese, Koreans and others.

## The Interface

Wildflowers grew out of the premise that thriving communities need both a nurturing "core" steeped in culture and tradition and an "interface" zone that reaches out and speaks the vocabulary of the mainstream culture. "We think it's in that interface where a lot of creative work, a lot of thoughtful work, a lot of analytic work and a lot of advocacy work needs to happen," said Liu.

The underlying cultural patterns, however, tend to be invisible, so the Wildflowers meeting planners used focus

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groups, video, music, computer renderings and model building to help the patterns emerge. Composer Francis Wong drove home the “interface” idea on opening night with a video clip of Chen Jiebing, master of the Chinese two-stringed *erhu*, improvising with African-American jazz drummer Max Roach. “Notice how they’re each using their own language and sound—stepping out of their comfort zones,” noted Wong. “Creative tension is a significant aspect of any interaction between different cultures.”

As a preview of the next two days of site visits, Liu’s 13-year-old son Weisheng screened videos he had produced on the “core identities” of five API communi-

ties: Filipino *kapwa* or unity of self and others, Cambodian compassion, Iu Mien *yinyong yitlai* or moral conduct in the material and spiritual world, Lactian *pinong* or interrelatedness and Chinese *ren* or endurance.

Liu also displayed a complex multicolored “cultural map” showing the leadership structure of the Iu Mien, a highland Lao minority group that fled its land after the U.S. withdrawal in 1975, settled in Oakland, California, where they re-established their traditional leadership structure by dividing the population into eight “districts.” (See cultural map above.)

Since the Iu Mien are interspersed among other Oakland residents, the dis-

tricts are based on their home villages, not their current residences. The district leaders facilitate communication among the Iu Mien, who have no written language. They also help community members solve problems and mediate disputes. But, noted Liu, “this formation is totally invisible to anyone who lives in Oakland. It doesn’t have a 501(c)(3).”

Studies 2000 participant Sherry Hirota, a trustee of the California Endowment and CEO of Oakland-based Asian Health Services, marveled at the map, noting that Iu Mien leader Kouichoy Saechao had served on AHS’ board for 15 years. “I thought we did a good job serving his community, but I never

saw that,” said Hirota, pointing to the map.

I had a similarly humbling feeling two days later. While others were visiting Oakland’s Iu Mien community and San Francisco’s Chinatown, I joined a site visit to the heart of San Francisco’s Filipino community in the South of Market (SOMA) area. Despite working for seven years at the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the heart of the neighborhood, I had only passing awareness of the extent to which a Filipino community has been thriving in the shadows of the Sony Metreon, the Moscone Center and the dot-com invasion.

A bus tour by community organizer M. C. Canlas opened my eyes. We saw a



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health center, a senior center, a bilingual education center, an elementary school with 46 percent Filipino enrollment, a teen center primarily serving Filipino youth, a Catholic church with nearly 90 percent Filipino parishioners, a minitheater for Filipino talents and various low-income housing developments and residence hotels. Community leaders said a series of model-building exercises and talking circles with the Wildflowers team helped them uncover key cultural patterns they hadn't identified. They realized, for example, how SOMA mirrors the plazas that were the focal point for intervillage activities back in the Philippines. People flock from Daly City and other suburbs to SOMA just as village people in the Philippines gathered in the plazas.

The previous day we had traveled 90 miles to Stockton, California, home to a large population of Southeast Asian refugees. One group visited the Lao/Khmu community, and the others went to Park Village, an apartment complex owned and run by the Cambodian residents through a nonprofit called APSARA, Asian Pacific Self-development and Residential Association. APSARA helped organize Park Village residents to buy Park Village from HUD for \$1, and in the process improved conditions in the once gang-ridden housing complex.

Funders heard the story of Im Chan, 52, who lost her parents, her first husband and her second child in Khmer Rouge camps but eventually made it to Park Village with her second husband and five children. By 1989 the family finally began to recover a sense of security and serenity—only to have their oldest daughter, Ram, shot down on the school playground by a deranged killer. "I thought by coming to this country, I would be safe," she told us. "But unfortunately, it turned out to be one of my saddest moments, just like the Khmer Rouge. During my entire life, I never saw any kind of shooting at a school. We never had anything like that in Cambodia."

Although social service agencies flocked to the neighborhood to help Im Chan and families of the other four children who were killed in the school shooting, Im Chan doesn't recall them

helping much. One of the few people she said she could rely on was APSARA Executive Director Sovanna Koert.

### **We Don't Want to Melt**

Although the meetings were not designed for communities to seek grants, funders did learn about some of the pressing issues for each of the communities. In the Filipino community, for example, one issue that particularly rankles is the plight of the 17,000 World War II veterans living in the United States. After waiting until 1990 for the U.S. government to fulfill its promise of making them citizens, the veterans still lack the pensions, medical care, burial rights and family education benefits accorded to other U.S. veterans. In their late 70s, many of the men have been blocked from bringing their wives to join them in this country because they're surviving here on Supplemental Security Income. "You can't imagine how humiliating it is being treated like welfare recipients," said Mars Estrada of the Veterans Equity Center. "They should be going to the Veterans Administration, but they're treated like parasites."

Filipino leaders spoke strongly about the need to nurture the community's cultural foundations. They noted the community's disappointment at recently becoming a finalist for a grant and then being turned down because the proposal didn't include other ethnic groups. They felt they were rejected for being "too Filipino." "We're not here with our cups out," said Bill Sorro, a board member of the Manilatown Heritage Foundation. "This is a community that's been here for 80 years. If they fund us or don't fund us, we're going to keep on doing what we've always done. We know what happens in terms of melting [pots]. We don't want to melt."

The other communities voiced similar concerns about preserving their cultures, but perhaps none was as pronounced as the Lu Mien. "We have no country, no formal education, no written language," said Saechao. "If we have no cultural foundation, the newly educated generation won't have a place to come back to. In America they really care about the spotted owl. We're an endangered species too." Saechao and the other community leaders urged funders to see their

communities on the communities' terms and to pay attention not just to specific program areas, but to the communities' needs for core support to strengthen themselves.

"Often the funders just look at numbers," noted Saechao in one of the discussion sessions. "Often they fail to look at partnerships or good deeds. It doesn't take 5,000 people to destroy the community. It only takes a few. No matter how much money you have or how big your house is, if you don't have a community, that is sad. That's where our pride is."

Community leaders noted that funders' priorities often don't match community needs. Take teen pregnancy and parenting, for example: As an endangered species, the Iu Mien aren't concerned about reducing pregnancy, and "parenting" programs are an insult to community members who believe they know how to be parents. "There's a new kind of advocacy here," observed Hanmin Liu. "It's a cultural advocacy."

Grantmakers, of course, have their own culture, which often communicates in ways that don't come naturally to Asians, noted Anni Chung, executive director of Self-Help for the Elderly of Chinatown. "We're taught from very young never to show our strengths," said Chung. "On the other hand, if funders do see the strengths, will they forget that there are real needs?"

Although few foundation officials had ready solutions, they were generally sympathetic to the communities' predicaments. "When you have limited resources, you have to figure out ways to say no," said Hirota. "It could be you're 'too Filipino,' you're too healthy, you're too small in number. I understand the frustration."

Irene Lee, senior associate from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, noted that competition for grants pushes minority groups to aggregate to present a larger number. Craig McGarvey, program director at the James Irvine Foundation, advised communities to work with program officers and build relationships with other communities.

Several funders noted that the foundations still have much to learn from the communities. "You realize the depth of the culture and the traditions and how capable they are," noted Sandra

Hernandez, executive director of the San Francisco Foundation. "It tells us we can't sit in board rooms and try to figure this stuff out. You have to get out of your comfort zone and work with translators and follow the body language. It's fatiguing. It's tiring. It's been a very humbling experience, and I come from an immigrant family."

Taryn Higashi, Ford Foundation program officer in charge of immigrant and refugee rights, said she sees immediate applications for the lessons of Studies 2000: "We support organizations that aspire to represent all API interests. It will help me ask them questions to understand the reach of their work."

The program also led some funders to ask themselves questions: For example, how can they work with community associations like the Iu Mien's that aren't 501(c)(3)s? Eleanor Clement Glass, director of programs at the San Francisco Foundation, talked about working through fiscal sponsors. There was also discussion of how the different types of foundations can work together, such as by regranteeing from larger foundations through local community foundations.

Then there were the more profound questions that came up in the closing session, where funders had an opportunity to use colored blocks, plastic figurines and mirrors of different sizes to try their hand at the sort of model building the community members had engaged in before Studies 2000. In his model, Rolland Lowe, trustee of several foundations and board member of the Council on Foundations, pondered the difficulty of understanding communities: A small male figure gazed into a mirror, which blocked his view of a community of figurines. "No matter how big I think I am, I still really reflect to a great degree myself," said Lowe, proving he had grasped the message of Studies 2000. "This is a reminder to try to look through the mirror." ■

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