An Overview

We at Wildflowers Institute have spent almost fifty years pursuing this question: What are the best modes for the community-at-large to unleash the people's inherent potential in ways that allow community members to thrive?

We have found time and again that supportive individuals, service providers, families, clans, informal groups, formal organizations, and donors are engaging with the wellsprings of community strength. But often, each is working independently and drawing from intangible elements of a community's history and culture and informal relationships that build family and social "nests." A nest is not always visible through the lens of formal institutions and philanthropic organizations and is often unarticulated by the community itself. But once identified and reinforced, it becomes a powerful force for lasting change that springs organically from love, mutuality, and spontaneity. Our goal is to bring together the independent and collective acts of kindness across modalities and positionalities into an enduring and effectual force of good.

The Greenhouse Project

We are launching The Greenhouse Project to address and strengthen the alignment of stakeholders—individual and organizational, formal and informal—more systematically, and to find ways of unleashing the independent resources that exist within any given community. In partnership with the Aspen Institute, Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation residences, and potentially other organizations and localities, we seek to transcend the divide between formal institutions (governed by the rule of law and official policy) and family, clan, and social groups and associations (animated by informal codes of trust and respect). In bridging this divide, we hope to foster transformational—and self-sustaining—solutions to community sustainability. The Greenhouse Project will help stakeholders discover the unseen unity within a community, thereby dramatically strengthening the relationships and visions that are vital for its sustainability and flourishing. The approach builds on decades of experience and leverages the community's elders as a—perhaps *the*—key community asset. As we continue to discern, learn from, document, and share the insights of

community members, The Greenhouse Project will help service providers and donors join with us to find more effective ways to advance community strength.

The Greenhouse Project is guided by Wildflowers Institute's metaphor: Wildflowers are the first plants to grow after a fire, providing the first sustainable root structures and nutrients that allow for the restoration of the ecosystem to begin. A greenhouse is where seedlings grow and flourish so they can be planted elsewhere. In our work with community members, we seek to nourish seedlings in the neighborhood and the larger provider-donor ecosystem. The drawing below depicts a group of elders at a workshop in the center of their metaphorical greenhouse.

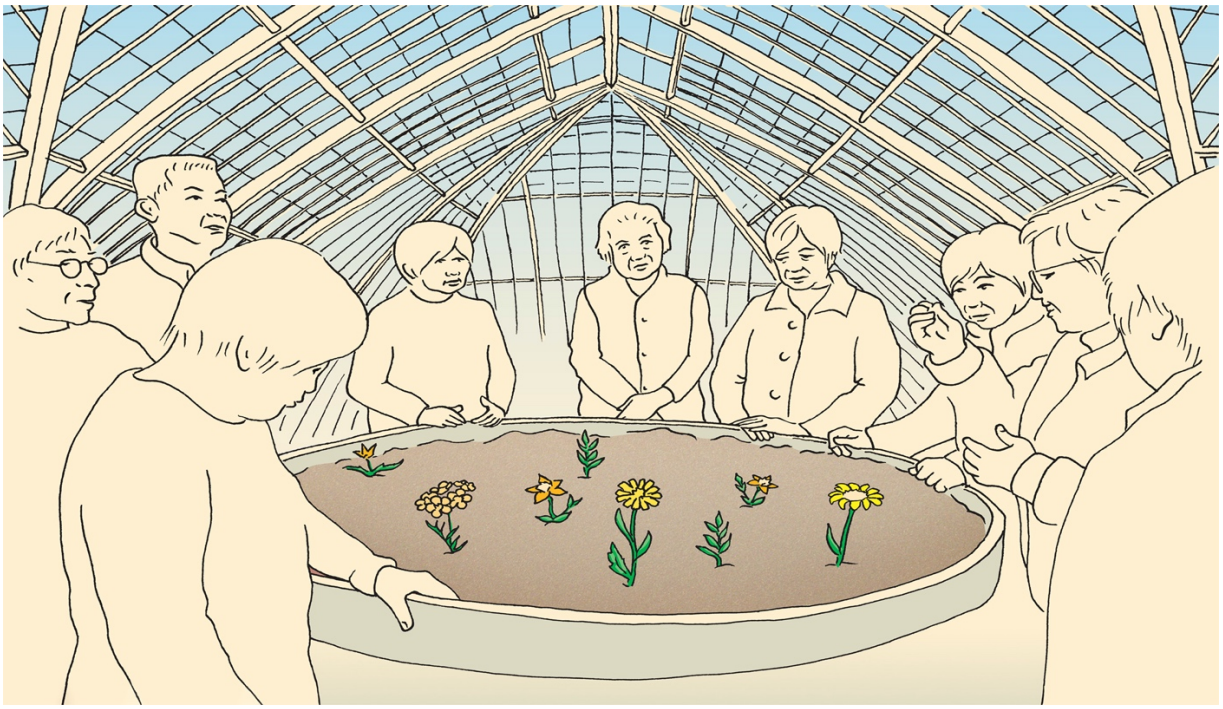


Illustration by John Borruso

Discovering the Unity

Every community is organized differently. Each has its own history, culture, and social norms to guide its members and provide lessons on what makes life worth living. Because each community is different, with implicit and unrecognized manners and qualities, it's not always easy to discern what draws a community together. Professor Hsiao-Tung Fei describes this well:

"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. The basic premises of a particular culture are unconsciously accepted by the individual through his constant and exclusive participation in that culture. 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. Since it is taken for granted by the people, the student will not find it formulated verbally. On the contrary, it must usually be inferred from concrete behavior, a process which requires a certain insight on the part of the observer."[1]

Over time, we've learned what to look for. We have found, for example, that one of the best ways to improve community sustainability among the Chinese diaspora is to align philanthropic work with the positive energy embraced by many thousands of people who are already making good things happen. For descriptions of how such positive energy is being manifested in the form of a code of honor called *li* (禮) to organize the family and the community today, see Wildflowers Institute's newsletter Toward a Caring and Enduring Family "Nest," March 3, 2026. Accepting duties, compromising, and being unselfish in the interest of harmony are virtues that guide and foster cooperative relationships across differences in race, ethnicity, gender preferences, Indigenous heritage, and generations. When such qualities align with an organizing force of justice, human-hearted behavior emerges among the common people and the community endures and thrives.[2]

While we first came to understand the importance of *li* in our work with the Chinese diaspora, we have come to see forms of *li* undergirding all communities. Service and philanthropy that can discern and support a community's *li* will unlock the preexisting moral wealth of a community and

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[1] Hsiao-Tung Fei and Chih-I-Chang, *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan* (University of Chicago, 1945), 81–82.

[2] See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1956), 566.

is more likely to yield abundance. The Greenhouse Project will allow us a more focused and systematic way to deepen and spread our insights among communities, service providers, and philanthropists alike. We’re excited to see what grows and blooms.