

Rhizome Podcast Transcript: Cultural and Community Work in Chinatown with aiya哎呀 collective

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Wen Chan 0:02

Hello and welcome. My name is Wen Chan and I'll be joining you today on the final episode of this series on the [Rhizome Podcast](#). The Rhizome Podcast is a youth-led project of [Roots4Change](#) from the [John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights](#). This podcast featured local youth to discuss key issues impacting our communities in so-called Edmonton. As the rise of violence towards Asian people has been exacerbated during Covid, we wanted to explore more what it means to collectively resist and heal together. In this episode, Reese, Elaine, and I chatted with Shawn Tse, a member from [aiya哎呀 collective](#). aiya哎呀 is an intergenerational group of artists and cultural workers offering spaces to remember the emotional and geographic loss of amiskwacîwâskahikan -- particularly in Chinatown. aiya哎呀's work to form openings for liberation and belonging would not be possible without aiya哎呀's core members, including Grace Law, Lan Chan-Marples, Wai-Ling Lennon, and Shawn Tse. Keep on listening to hear our chat with Shawn on how aiya哎呀's work with community is so important in the ongoing displacement and cultural erasure of Chinatown.

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Shawn Tse 1:27

Hello, um, my name is Shawn Tse. My full Chinese name is 謝兆龍 [*Zhe Siu Lung*] in Cantonese. I go by he/him pronouns. And I'm joining you folks in amiskwacîwâskahikan, also known as Edmonton, Treaty Six Territory. I appreciate the introduction, because I- I think it's always changing actually the way that it introduced myself. And I'm just learning more and more of, you know, my commitment to myself, and also how I am connected with the city and the community, so thank you.

Reese Kurian 2:14

Yeah, that's beautiful. Um, so moving on, we chose to have you on our episode, because we were talking about and working in reaction to the exponential growth of racism in North America during COVID. And we wanted to reach out to you because of your role at aiya哎呀 and the work you do in Chinatown. Could you tell us a bit more about how aiya哎呀 came to be and what it is today and your place there?

Shawn Tse 2:47

Mm hmm. Yeah. So I would say, and there are actually a few different like narratives to how I officially came about, but the one that I can kind of point to is out of a response to the Harbin Gate removal that happened in 2017. This gate was actually in our city from 1987 to 2017. And so 30 years, and it, you know, has been pretty much a landmark site, from a historical point of view, the second iteration of Chinatown for decades, right? And so, I think the time for community, reflection, mourning, and even grasping what our power is, in terms of what we can

do within our community, is something that aiya 哎呀 has always been kind of responding to or trying to grasp. I think the removal really just shook up a lot of people's understandings and also things to wonder about in terms of why and how do decisions within such higher structures work, you know, and how do we- how do we get more involved, and how do we be part of these conversations? Because we certainly do feel that a lot of voices are left out. Soon around the time that we knew about the Harbin Gate being removed, there was a vigil that some of the leaders within the Chinese community had set up very quickly. Because of the timeline being so urgent, like we also felt like the time to mourn or to reflect and have a community space to even talk about this was kind of stripped away. And so that really prompted us to not just come together, but think of a way to have our own autonomy in terms of responding to something like this. And so that's what prompted aiya 哎呀's first project called, Harbin Gate Remembrance, where we organized a few different public engagements to allow folks to write in Chinese calligraphy the original name of Harbin Gate, which is 中華門 [*chung wah mune*] in Cantonese, and Mandarin, Joan Kwame Mun, that literally just means Chinese cultural gate or door. And so that prompted a way for people to recognize or- or to name what was taken away. But also another component of it on the actual art banner, as we called it, a place for people to write their own personal reflections or say anything that they wanted to in terms of their relationship with that gate. And we also had- one of our members is a very gifted knitter, and so there were some very beautiful doilies that were hanging from the bottom of those art banners. So something that you might see within even like an Asian home in terms of like, a Chinese banner, or like something that you might even see around like Chinese New Year. And then those banners on one of our engagements was to hang them up. And so we had about 150 of them, and we put them up with permission from the construction company doing the LRT, were able to put it up on that construction fence. And so yeah, it was really, really amazing to be part of such a community effort. And seeing that there was this way to kind of wiggle in our thoughts and hopes and just space for the community to do something more than just, you know, this idea that, you know, you can only fit it in with this, like one vigil that happened, you know what I mean?

Reese Kurian 6:47

I can see how it's really important to take autonomy and bring people together in those times. And kind of reclaiming that space and what you have in reclaiming language and tradition and cultural knowledge. How does intergenerational values play into that?

Shawn Tse 7:10

Yeah, I think that's actually something that we really, really appreciate in aiya 哎呀. Uh so the four core members are myself, Grace Law, Lan Chan-Marples, and Wai-Ling Lennon. Wai-Ling and Lan are in many respects our aunties. And so they have a lot of amazing cultural and community knowledge that Grace and I wouldn't necessarily have access to. And so they are so core and key to essentially allowing for Grace and I to have a seat at the table to things that maybe we wouldn't be able to just knocking on doors, you know? And so, Lan has been a community organizer within the Chinatown community for just decades and actually grew up in the original Chinatown. And then Wai-Ling is like an amazing caring teacher, and she's really looped in with like the bilingual program work and has done a lot of work within the Chinatown

library. And so, yeah, just so many limitless connections that they have been able to bridge. Like, I think we definitely like to just be very, very grateful for that intergenerational connection that we do have. And yeah, I think it's- it's so key to even potentially modeling some of the- the tensions that do exist inter- intergenerationally, across the board, right? Like, there always is kind of like this elephant in the room, maybe of this power dynamic between generations. And I would hope to think that we're challenging that by just our team and people seeing that it's not weird that I'm working with two people that are my mother's age, you know, like, I- I love that.

Reese Kurian 9:07

Yeah, that- that's so cool! It's just really amazing you work with that. And I can definitely relate to some of that and the culture values you hold. Um, now, wondering if we can take a little bit of a turn. Um, Elaine, do you want to take it on?

Elaine Tran 9:27

Yeah, I can definitely transition and kind of talking about moving back into Chinatown as a political space. So even in the creation of Chinatown as a place of trying to push out Chinese people from white spaces to racism and lack of resources and services and gentrification. There's a quote that, um, has really resonated with us as a group from the Alberta Art Gallery [\[view the article\]](#), and it reads, "The future of Chinatown is not just a Chinese person issue. The landscape of our city is a reflection of the systems we inherit and perpetuate. Chinatown is a part of Edmonton's story. So collectively, what we choose to honour, keep and care for is reflective of what is important to everyone who lives in the city." And kind of reflecting on that quote, when you think about it, why is your work with aiya哎呀 and Chinatown specifically so important?

Shawn Tse 10:18

I think it's about recognizing where and how we value community voices. This is not a just a Chinatown issue or a Chinese community issue. It's an issue that is just happening with so many groups and folks. And so I would hope that like whatever happens with what is learned through these processes, that there's a way to transfer this type of knowledge to folks that are not necessarily part of Chinatown, but are experiencing the same types of oppression.

Elaine Tran 10:55

Mm hmm.

Shawn Tse 10:56

You know, the more that we're able to share this within our communities, the more the awareness and um the understanding of where we're coming from, it's going to stick within the community, because ultimately, a lot of the things that happen in Chinatown, they need to come from the people. The problem that we're seeing a lot of is that if there aren't any people there, then the institutions or the people that do have a lot of the power are saying, well, if there's no people around the table, or there's not that many people around the table, then I guess we can make decisions based off of the data that we've collected, or the things that we think are good for here, right? And so my, you know, argument would be, well, whoever those high authorities

are to make these decisions, how do we hold them accountable to making sure that they do do enough to consult the people that care? Right? And so in terms of connecting it to is work, it's like, well, we know that we made 150 banners, so we know that there's at least 150, you know, up to the amount of people that came to our engagements, this many people that care about the Harbin Gate being removed. So how are the people making decisions making sure that they are engaged in these conversations? aiya哎呀's job is not that, we are not city planners, right? But we do care about making sure those voices are heard.

Elaine Tran 12:38

Right. Yeah, especially if the decisions made by city planners can have such a great and instrumental impact on the community (*laughs*). Sorry, my phone's just going off [*phone ringing in background*].

Shawn Tse 12:45

It's okay!

Elaine Tran 12:49

But I guess just reflecting on kind of what you had mentioned earlier, too, and with the removal of the Harbin Gate, which I believe was like a really significant cultural Edmontonian landmark, and you said that had prompted the inception of aiya哎呀. I guess I'm just wondering how that is connected to kind of the increased gentrification in Chinatown, and how that's contributed to erasure, and why it's so important that we speak out on these issues. And even when you were talking about the aftermath, and what had happened, and how you had mourned and lost this landmark in particular, I really connected with that quote, where it's like nothing before us without us. And so I think that idea has been doing really pivotal work in that area. And I guess I'm just wondering, what connection if at all, to gentrification do these, like decisions have?

Shawn Tse 13:39

It's- it's a very complex issue, and I think at the beginning, there is this kind of divisiveness, where you're just like, oh, it's the city! You know, they are the people that take our tax dollars, they are the people that eventually like, have created the economic strategy to inform what is going to be on these public spaces. But I think maybe some of that complexity that is lost is, how is the community notified or know that they have power to work with the city? Right? And so there certainly is some sort of gap or barrier when it comes to the public and knowing what exactly the city does, right? Like you- you often like, talk to a neighbor, and they're just like, ah, you know, like, I can't believe they did this on me. Like, they just changed it, blah, blah, blah. Like it's not as cut and paste, right? Like there certainly is a process into things. It's just how do these community folks know where they can actually have a voice? Right? Because I think a lot of people don't even realize that there are all these engagements that you could be signing up to, like a community league level even, right? Like every single neighborhood in Edmonton has a community league, right? And so, if you join their board or if you add to their membership and you're active, then that is another platform for you to speak to the city about your neighborhood, right? Like, what I'm realizing is that what maybe is not fair, is that when we're doing things that are like these public things, whose time is it, that has to come out? So there's a privilege in folks

like me that have: A) the understanding that I need to be more active in the way that I hold public decisions to account, but then, B) do I even have the time to come out to advocate, right? Like, am I able to show up to those like pivotal meetings where I can actually raise my concerns? And I'm not getting paid to do this, whereas all the city staff, they are getting paid, they get our tax dollars to do that. So it does feel oppressive. I have to dip out of my own personal time, which then again, like, I understand folks who are very frustrated with the city, because they're like, why is it my job? I don't want to put a full fault on anyone. I don't think that's productive. And so how does a community and the ones that are invested and want to see a change, how do they work together? How do they negotiate? And how do they make it a win-win for everyone? Like, although aiyā 哎呀 definitely is very invested and loves Chinatown, we are not, and should not be considered like the voice of Chinatown. If anything, how do we just open up the spaces so that people feel like they have a voice I think would be our first step. Because there certainly is that gap. I think right now.

Elaine Tran 16:49

Yeha. No, that's really powerful, especially because I think Chinatowns are not just a monolith of Chinese people, but there are very different cultures and communities present within this space, there needs to be I guess, a form of unity, I guess, especially given the history of displacement and- and removal of cultural landmarks, like you had mentioned. Personally, like, as a young Vietnamese person, um I would go to Chinatown every week with my family, you know, heading to shops and buying things for, you know, dinners and stuff like that. And it was a very visceral experience for me, and it was something that I really cherish. Um even though I'm not Chinese, that space is still very close to me and that space is still very real to me. And so, even though the majority of your members are of Chinese heritage, how have you been able to include others and hold space for other diverse voices?

Shawn Tse 17:42

Mm hmm. Well, I think for now, we haven't actually been doing much of that very broad inclusive work. What I kind of talk about is really just our hopes and dreams for Chinatown and what we see. But we are very much still within our own infancy with really developing internally, and working together and- and just finding that alignment on what as a collective we have shared values on. And so some may even say like, yeah, like our process is pretty slow, because a lot of it is about reflecting not just what we feel internally, but sharing that with folks and- and learning from each other what that's going to be, because it's always changing, right? And, you know, since the pandemic, we've learned so much in terms of what we value and what we are seeing is happening in our communities, right? And so, yeah, there's no shortage of needing to kind of (*laughs*), like take a break from it, but also use it as information to really help us and inform us on what the community needs when we're talking about care. You know what I mean? But yeah, like, for sure, our projects right now wouldn't be addressing a lot of those hopes that we would love to see in Chinatown in terms of like more diverse solidarity. That is a huge project within itself. But I agree that it's very much needed in Chinatown.

Elaine Tran 19:27

Yeah, no, thank you for sharing that. I think especially just within the contemporary context with the anti-Asian racism that has going on is not, you know, unique to only one community. Unfortunately, it has transversed and in many other communities, and so I think it's important to acknowledge that there's a vision for unity in Chinatown. Um, Thank you. Uh, Wen did you want to pivot?

Wen Chan 19:48

Yeah, for sure. I think like as, Elaine, you were talking about this need for a cross movement, solidarity with multiple diverse groups who are at the root of it are experiencing oppressions rooted in like white supremacy, colonization, capitalism, patriarchy. And like how these all impact different communities in different ways, but like, those roots are causing a lot of harm and violence. And I think like, there's kind of this romanticization of like Black-Asian solidarity that's so uprooted from that specific context, and that time and like looking here, and now I think we're missing a lot of what that like deep trust, and relationship, and solidarity actually means and looks like. And Shawn, you're talking how like, it's a slow process in actually understanding what care looks like to different people. And I think like the work *aiya* 哎呀 does, really illuminates like a lot of the generational harm that's happened that y'all are doing to like, latterly educate others in the community, about our own city about tradition and culture. And I think that can be missing a lot in like the virality of like, Stop Asian Hate in like understanding these interconnected issues that are structural, but also like the need for that cultural resurgence, and like deep trust with each other. Like, I wonder if you had like a learning that has resonated with you that you think would be constructive to this discourse in like the local in here right now?

Shawn Tse 21:35

Mm hmm. I think us having this interview and seeing your very amazing, brave, like your faces together, is an act of defying what the norm wants us to be. Like, we don't even need to talk about the hashtags and the trend, and all that other jazz. Because you folks right now are doing exactly that. You know, you guys are intentionally making space to have these conversations, and to bring your diverse experiences to the table and negotiate what, like community resilience looks like, you know what I mean? Like, I think it's so beautiful to see folks like you, just being so intentional about your work. *(laughs)* I like- like, it kind of makes me a bit emotional, because I'm like, yo, where was that when I was growing up? Honestly, right? Like, even in Toronto, where people would consider it a very, like multicultural city, and like, oh, you had everything, like the food, the blah, blah, blah, like everything. And it's kind of true, like, I did have a lot of different -- I mean, most of my friends were still white, but a lot of them were also different coloured folks. But that was I think, a bit more tokenized because there were no spaces for us to be like, what is colonization? What is racism? What- I mean, there was a little racism, I mean, talking about racism, like, I think that was the only entry point, like we were on a different level than you folks are now, when we talk about equity when we talk about social justice and human rights. So I applaud, and this maybe goes back into that intergenerational piece like, I am learning so much from you guys. I am learning so much about the language, and really appreciating and more respecting our intersectionality and our diverse entry points to all this trauma, you know what I'm saying? So, like, the fact that I could even have the space to have an interview with you guys is-

[pauses] I couldn't have never dreamed of having something like that when I was growing up, you know what I mean? So it's super heartwarming. And you know, I think sometimes we even think of this work as like, oh, you know, we talk about it, and then it's just like, okay, we're done, check the box, and let's move on, right? But I'm just gonna plant the seed right here with you, because I mean, I love the fact that this is local, and I will eventually see all your lovely faces in person, um that I have a newborn and he will definitely reap all the benefits from connecting with y'all folks, because he needs more of these type of people in the generation that you're in to coach him and mentor him. That is something that I've already- like, guys, please accept him! You know like! *(laughs)* I'm already thinking about that, like and so, I don't know, like this- these are like the kind of intergenerational things that I'm like, you know, really, really like, wow. Like, as a father, I'm just like, oh, man, I gotta, you know, like who I am, what I represent is exactly what my son and my community, you know, that's how everything will get reciprocated, right? And so we need to surround ourselves with what we imagine what that future is going to be. And that is how we will get there. And so I think, for me growing up, I made choices where it actually conflicted with what my values were. And for whatever reason, those things did distract me from potentially getting to or being around those folks that I would have probably resonated more with.

Wen Chan 25:47

I'm just full of like, warm fuzzies *(laughs)*. But I think the work like you do with aiya, and just hearing your journey, like how- how your work has evolved through the years like that is so inspiring to me. And I think it's definitely like a two-way-street of admiration and learning that I think we're all engaging in right now. And through this whole process, it's been a lot of self reflection, and like, how do we make these places as consensual and reciprocal, and like, how do we envision what this looks like and how we want to create a world where we feel good with? So, just want to send that love back to you.

Elaine Tran 26:31

I guess, just to kind of wrap up. One big thing is obviously, we talked about the bridge from one young Asian to an Asian Elder to the next. Keep it going. How can folks get involved with aiya 哎呀 and where can we find you?

Shawn Tse 26:45

Uh we have a Facebook page and Instagram handles, so it's @aiyacollective. So yeah, you can follow our work there.

Wen Chan 26:55

Awesome! It was such an honour and pleasure to have you on, Shawn. Thank you so much.

Shawn Tse 27:02

Thank you very much for having me.

[music]

Wen Chan 27:09

A deep thank you there, Shawn on behalf of aiya 哎呀 for opening up about why it's so important to do this cultural work in Chinatown. We really appreciate you sharing the space with us as well as your own lived experiences. We hope this conversation moves you to critically connect with the land you're on and what your own obligations may look like. Speaking of that, this conversation with Shawn was actually recorded in the summer of 2021. And since then, aiya 哎呀 has been up to some incredible work in the community. I personally attended their workshops entitled, Still in Chinatown on Indigenous Land, and it was truly a testament to the active process of building community and healing together. I think if I was transported back to my 10 year old self, I wouldn't have been able to imagine such spaces of belonging and community. It was so freeing to unpack, hold space, and work together with other racialized folks in our community. These spaces remind me of the power of community and solidarity, and how everyone has a role and stake in our collective freedom. If you want to stay updated on more of aiya 哎呀's work, like that workshop, you can follow them on Instagram [@aiyacollective](#), and on Facebook [@Aiya 哎呀](#). To view [transcripts](#) of this episode and find us on social media, visit our website at jhcentre.org/roots4change. Thank you to the [John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights](#) for supporting us through this whole project. And also a big thank you to our funders, the [Edmonton Community Foundation](#), for continuing to support our work. And be sure to dial into some community radio on [CJSR 88.5FM](#) to also hear us on the airwaves. Last but definitely not least, we thank you for sharing your time with us. One of our hopes for this podcast is to mobilize beyond these conversations into affecting the material conditions of youth for the better. A big part of this is building community together and we appreciate this community we've cultivated here. Please don't hesitate to get in touch with us if you have any questions, ideas, or want to get involved. Thanks again for joining us. We wish you to move on to the next part of your day with solidarity and love for justice and freedom.

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