



## Book Review

### Awakening Creativity: The Dandelion School Blossoms

by Lily Yeh (2011)

Oakland, CA: New Village Press.

208 pp., 9 b/w & 247 color illustrations

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Reviewed by Carolyn Brown Treadon

Assistant Professor, Florida State University  
Tallahassee, Florida

**A** *wakening Creativity: Dandelion School Blossoms*, by Lily Yeh is an in depth exploration of the development and implementation of the Dandelion School Project in the Daxing District on the outskirts of Beijing, China. Throughout the ten chapters, Yeh takes the reader on an exciting journey of her five year experience helping students and staff utilize the arts to transform the Dandelion School from a drab and desolate structure to one teeming with vibrancy and life.

Yeh structured her book into one that is not only easy to read but also one that is hard to set down. She walks the reader along her path leading up to this opportunity to work with the Dandelion School, a middle school that services migrant workers' children in the

poverty stricken Shou Bao Zhuang Village. An invitation from the principal, Zheng Hong, brought Yeh to the community. Each chapter provides an insight into the step by step processes that were taken to make this transformation a success.

The first chapter is autobiographical in which Yeh explores her development as an artist and the co-founder of both the non-profit Villages of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, PA and the international Barefoot Artists. She continues by detailing the journey of healing and transformation for students and staff at the Dandelion School. It was through her work at the Villages that Yeh "... realized that art is a powerful tool for social change and that artists can be at the center of that transformation" (p. 21). Over the past

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several years Yeh has used mosaic and mural work in poverty-stricken and war torn areas around the globe to help individuals and communities heal using the metaphor of putting the pieces back together.

It is not often that a book can transport the reader to another place and time, but Yeh has done this successfully. By including color images on every page, the reader gets lost in the school and community and makes readers feel part of the project from the beginning. Yeh tells a captivating story. In the book are vignettes and images from the students and staff who participated in the project. Their stories remind readers of the harsh realities of life. Yeh explained, "the writings exposed the loss and intense yearning of some of the children... their anxieties and fears of living in today's society...the story of two siblings haunts me" (p. 28-29)

Yeh took into account the Chinese culture and its unique educational focus in conceiving the project. Throughout the multi-stage project she emphasized the need to work with staff to ensure art making was integrated into all subject areas as a way to reinforce learning in all topic areas. Students and staff were integral to the planning process and in transforming the sterile gray and drab converted

factory into a school full of life.

Mosaics and murals on all available surfaces contained images abundant with symbolic meaning. Art teacher Pei Guang Rei is quoted as saying, "This new environment makes me feel worthy, calm and inspired. I sense a force of life here. It provides me with an opportunity to dream" (p. 180). Head librarian Niu Hua Lin stated, "The school is changed from a monotonous environment to a place full of vitality" (p. 180). Throughout the book, Yeh described her challenges as well as her successes at the school. Her vision was not always realized; she had to let go of several ideas in order to let the students' work shine. Her insight and ability to reflect on her own processes was refreshing.

This book is of interest for art educators, therapists, and administrators as well as artists and community activists. The simplicity of the book, yet rich with so much detail of the transformational process makes it possible for readers to see the possibility of completing such a project in their community. Yeh stated, "For me, beauty and creativity are not luxuries for a few. They are essential for our well-being. Like sunlight and air, they feed our souls" (p. 21). Yeh's belief may inspire readers to be involved in similar projects.