

Lewis Hine Documentary Fellowship
2010-2011
Final Report

The Alphabet Project:

We all know great stories – stories that have moved us, repositioned our opinion or even our purpose in this world. Stories of a shared experience, or from people close to us, or of those we’ve never met; on television, over the phone or across the dinner table. To tell a story is a precious act; it can take courage, passion and risk to share one’s story. I work to make storytelling a process of empowerment and positive change for the people behind great stories. I am motivated by a strong personal belief that communication is our most powerful tool as people, as storytellers, to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others.

Since I can remember, I have been profoundly affected by great stories, as a teller, and as a listener. As a documentarian, my job is to tell stories. Through my lens, imagery engages, on a daily basis, the stories of exceptional human bravery, intrigue and struggle. My lens was recently focused on Boston’s Chinatown community because of my mounting interest in the power and potential for documentary storytelling within community development – and thanks to the sponsorship of the Lewis Hine Documentary Fellowship of Duke University

As a 2010-2011 Lewis Hine Fellow, I worked with the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC) to develop documentary projects in the Chinatown community. BCNC is a multi-service agency with the mission to ensure that the children, youth, and families have the resources and support to achieve greater economic success and social well-being. BCNC serves more than 2,000 people a year – mostly immigrant Chinese, with low family incomes and limited English ability. I joined BCNC in October 2010 under the auspices of the Hine program.

From the start, I joined BCNC determined to introduce documentary work that would enrich BCNC and their vision for Chinatown’s future. I am grateful to my direct supervisor, Giles Li, and the staff at BCNC, for so quickly welcoming me as a colleague and an asset to their work. Early on, I assumed roles and responsibilities in almost every one of BCNC’s eight programs, from tutoring American citizenship applicants, to volunteering with our after school fitness programs, to assisting with parenting and counseling workshops. Not long after, I started producing multimedia stories that showcased BCNC to new audiences, including a radio series about some of Chinatown’s most celebrated leaders, for the StoryCorps National Day of Listening campaign.

Charged with the task of bringing our disparate programs closer together, I developed the idea to lead a long-form photography project among the different departments at BCNC. My visual literacy program, known as *The Alphabet Project*, is certainly my biggest and challenging project as a Hine Fellow, and the most enduring and meaningful contribution to BCNC.

The Alphabet Project is a series of six workshops, in which my students learn photography appreciation and technique, as well as to make photographs about BCNC’s role within the Chinatown community. In the end, each of my classes

produced twenty-six photographs that correspond to words that represent the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. During the span of six months, I led about one hundred students in eight classes, with participants ranging from ages five to seventy. *The Alphabet Project* is not only a valuable platform for collective reflection and discourse, but it is also a powerful testament to the distinct observations and hardships Chinese immigrants confront in American society.

My curriculum is designed specifically to adapt to the needs of our wide range of participants' ages, English ability, and the varying objectives of the different BCNC departments. For example, for my adult English as a Second Language students, I tweaked my lessons plans to stress photography terminology and vocabulary building and to emphasize writing practice by spending additional time free-writing and drafting captions. Due to its adaptability, low cost and multipurpose application, BCNC has found *The Alphabet Project* to be an excellent academic as well as artistic addition to programming across all departments.

Along with conceiving and teaching *The Alphabet Project*, I also designed large-form prints and a website to showcase the 208 photographs that the first eight classes produced. Both the printed and online exhibits offer a wide range of personal perspectives on life in Chinatown. The website is designed to bring attention to the literary and visual commonalities among the photographs, and in so doing, to uncover major themes that resonate throughout BCNC. Repeated words like "family" and "growth" paired with visuals of shaking hands and open doors – these are valued insights into BCNC's significance and purpose within the Chinatown community from the people who know them best. Just as *The Alphabet Project* encourages student photographers to look at themselves and their community in new and evolving ways, it has helped BCNC understand its constituents and mission even better.

I am proud to write that *The Alphabet Project* enjoys a lasting impact at BCNC and in the Chinatown community. BCNC's Oak Street Youth Center introduced *The Alphabet Project* into their summer schedule, and the After School Enrichment Program has been implementing it this fall. I hope BCNC will continue to draw from *The Alphabet Project* in the future.

For full access to the exhibit, as well as additional information on the documentary, please visit *The Alphabet Project* website:
www.chinatownalphabetproject.com

Generation Dance:

In addition to my work at the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, I developed an independent documentary about elderly immigration and the Chinese ballroom dance scene, called *Generation Dance*. After ten months of participant observation, during which I conducted interviews, made more than 4,000 photographs and produced six videos (one which was broadcast on WGBH, PBS), *Generation Dance* is essentially a 20-photograph and oral history project. The final exhibition explores twentieth century Chinese ballroom dance history from the

perspectives and personal histories of elderly immigrants living in Boston Chinatown.

Twice a week, about two-dozen retirees meet at the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association for two hours of ballroom dance. Women slip into glittery heels as men sort the sign-in sheet and song selection. As the music starts to reverberate into the old wooden floorboards, feet begin to shuffle to the rhythms of foxtrot, waltz and rumba.

There is a wide regional variety in language, cultural practice and socioeconomic status present in the dance hall, reflecting the size and diversity of China itself. Among the dance patrons, there are retired accountants, engineers, professors, doctors, restaurant owners, day laborers, and housewives. People hailing from two of the largest migrant-sending regions to Boston – Guangdong Province and Hong Kong – constitute more than half of the dancing population. The rest come from various other provinces including those in northern China, as well as Shanghai and the island of Taiwan.

As is typical in Boston Chinatown, the air is dominated by exchanges in Cantonese, though other languages that fill the hall include Mandarin (the official language of the People’s Republic and Taiwan) and Taishanese, a dialect from Guangdong Province. Most dancers corral with friends from their same tongue, though language does not hinder any dancing among the group as a whole.

While the variety of dances may be similar to commercial social dance halls in China, the Boston Chinatown dance hall is a hodgepodge of regional variations of styles. As such, the Chinese “national consciousness” being played out on the dance floor is an old-fashioned, cultural mishmash. Ballads by Taiwan’s Deng Lijun (Teresa Tang) and PRC songs idolizing Chairman Mao bring about the same amount of nostalgia.

As an art form and as a practice, Chinese ballroom dance is a paradox of collective and individual identity expression. In a predominantly Anglo-Saxon city outside of the dance hall—these participants are used to being labeled, in the most blanket of terms, as immigrant Chinese. And in one sense, the dance hall patrons reinforce this homogenous national concept—they come to the weekly sessions to find company among their Chinese friends, to listen to Chinese music, and to speak Chinese.

And yet like the hodgepodge of songs that float through the air – this awkward mixing of Chinese aesthetics allow the dancers to celebrate their different backgrounds and experience. Through light variations in song and dance, the patrons are able to express tremendous linguistic, political and ethnic discrepancies that make each of them unique. Ballroom dance is both a locus for collective memory and a platform for personal identity building.

When Boston Chinatown’s retirees are waltzing on the floor, they are not longing to escape communism, or hastening to become “Westerners.” Rather, they are embracing a transitory identity. Ballroom dancing is the very attempt to respond to the intercultural existence through the body. The very act of ballroom dance reflects and resists cross-cultural values simultaneously. This is the universality of ballroom dance.

Jennifer Carpenter
jenniferalicecarpenter.com

At its core, *Generation Dance* is a story about Chinese ballroom dance from the generation that witnessed a whirlwind of war, revolution and nation building. As China and Chinatowns change with the times, ballroom dance serves as a powerful and beautiful demonstration of one generation's uniting and transitory experience. By exploring the complexities of Chinese ballroom dance history, interwoven with distinct, deeply personal accounts from immigrant retirees, *Generation Dance* offers unique insight into the value of self-expression and community-building through dance.

Generation Dance returns to Boston Chinatown in summer 2012, where it will exhibit at the W/Y Gallery. I am also currently negotiating showings at the John Hope Franklin Center at Duke University for fall 2012, and the Atrium Gallery at the London School of Economics for early 2013.

For a full description and access to the multimedia, please visit the *Generation Dance* website: www.generationdance.weebly.com