

*AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER: LESSONS IN RECOGNIZING AND RESISTING
IMPERIALISM*

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2022

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ABSTRACT

KALEI WOODFORD. *Avatar: The Last Airbender: Lessons in Recognizing and Resisting Imperialism*

(Under the direction of DR. BASU)

In the modern world, we are constantly fed misinformation and biased information. The press is controlled by the state in many countries like the United States and Russia. These governments have the power to start wars, imprison whomever they deem a threat to their power, and kill the ‘threat’ to the country and government. This is the result of imperialism. This is how fascism grows. It is rooted in the corruption of the state and in the leader of the country. How can a people know their leader if their government is lying to them, and they do not have access to truthful reports? In this capitalist society, the average citizen does not have the time, resources, or money to find information that has not been censored by their government.

This is why it is necessary for children to learn how to fight and resist imperialism. For example, Reporters Without Borders created The Uncensored Library in a Minecraft server. The library holds texts that were censored by the reporters’ government. It also includes articles from reporters who were suspiciously killed. Why Minecraft, a children’s game? Because it is available in every country, even ones that severely control information. It would be near impossible to destroy The Uncensored Library because Reporters Without Borders would be able to remake it on a different server.

In a similar vein, the children’s show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* covers themes such as imperialism, information control (censorship), trauma, and spiritualism. *Avatar’s* target audience is children aged six to eleven. What makes *Avatar* unique as a children’s

show is how it teaches children lessons to recognize and resist imperialism in their own lives. *Avatar* uses multiple perspectives, complex storytelling, and nuance to inform and teach children about imperialism. Also, how to resist it, and how to think and act on their emotions, especially anger and sadness. It is with this knowledge that children begin to understand their world, their role in it, and how to change it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would never have happened without the support of my thesis advisor, Dr. Basu, and my committee: Dr. West and Dr. Tarr. I cannot express how grateful I am to have such a wonderful and accommodating committee. Thank you for supporting me.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my family, especially my mom and sister who pushed me to finish it.

Thank you for believing in me and supporting me.

I also dedicate this to my friend, Makayla, who kept me motivated to complete it.

Lastly, I dedicate this to my cat, Violet, for supervising me while I wrote it.

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INTRODUCTION

Avatar: The Last Airbender was one of Nickelodeon's most popular shows from 2005 to 2008. It was marketed and geared towards children. This is surprising because *Avatar* does not shy away from difficult topics. The consequences of imperialism, genocide, and the trauma imperialism provokes onto both the oppressor and victim as well as the natural environment are some examples.

Avatar centers on a central conflict between the Fire Nation that began a war a hundred years ago against the rest of the nations. In the *Avatar* universe, there are four nations: the aforementioned Fire Nation, the Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribes (North and South), and the Air Nomads. Before Firelord Sozin, the nations coexisted peacefully. However, Sozin wished to expand the Fire Nation. He did so by invading the Earth Kingdom and committing genocide against the Air Nomads. The Fire Nation killed the Air Nomads because the previous Avatar was born into the Fire Nation and would be reincarnated into the Air Nomads.

The Avatar has a very important role in the *Avatar* universe. They are tasked with keeping the balance between the nations and act as a bridge to the Spirit World. The Avatar is also the only person who can bend all four elements. The Avatar is reincarnated in a cycle: Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. Traditionally, the Avatar is told on their sixteenth birthday that they are the Avatar and then spend years training in each nation to master the element. However, the Avatar of the series, Aang, was told on his twelfth birthday. This led to Aang feeling isolated from the rest of the children. He was told early because the Air Nomads felt that the Fire Nation was preparing to attack them in order to kill Aang. However, the pressure became too much for Aang, and he ran away from his temple. Unfortunately, Aang was caught in a terrible storm and remained frozen underwater near the Southern Water Tribe for a hundred years.

Without an Avatar to mediate between the nations, the Fire Nation colonized parts of the Earth Kingdom and conducted raids against the Southern Water Tribe as the Avatar would be reincarnated into one of the Water Tribes. The Fire Nation was unable to attack the Northern Water Tribe due to their natural defenses. However, the Southern Water Tribe was not as defensible. As the waterbender population of the village dwindled, it became easier for the Fire Nation to continue to attack them and imprison the waterbenders. Two of the protagonists, Sokka and Katara, witnessed a raid as young children and saw their mother die during one.

In Chapter One Race & Historical Context, I discuss the Asian influences present in the show. It is clear the creators used Chinese and Japanese influences to create the Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation, respectively. I argue that by doing so, it creates the roles of oppressor and victim as well as the colonizer and colonized. The Fire Nation is comparable to Japan during the Meiji Restoration and Japan during World War Two. The Meiji Restoration enforced the adaption of Western practices and directly influenced Japan invading Korea, Manchuria, and the Philippines. I argue that the Earth Kingdom is reminiscent of Korea, which makes them the victim and colonized.

My next section centers on the Dai Li. They are a secret police in Ba Sing Se, the capital of the Earth Kingdom. Their role is to keep any information about the hundred years' war from the civilians and Earth King in order to present Ba Sing Se as a peaceful and utopia-like city. However, it is made clear throughout the episode "City of Walls and Secrets" that the civilians do know of the war with the Fire Nation but are intimidated by the Dai Li. The Dai Li even go so far as to hypnotize and brainwash their citizens ("Lake Laogai"). I argue that the Dai Li are comparable to the surveillance states of the United States and Russia due to how easily both governments are able to spy on their own people (and foreigners) and use that information to

investigate them. I also argue that the Dai Li are comparable to these modern surveillance states because of how tightly controlled information is in the U.S. via major corporations such as Fox, Disney, and Comcast whom also influence legislation with financial support to senators and other government officials.

The next section focuses on the episode “The Library” and the spirit Wan Shi Tong. Wan Shi Tong is an outlier among the spirits shown in the *Avatar* series because Wan Shi Tong does not allow the protagonists to use the information they gather from his vast library against any other nation due to how the Fire Nation abused his library in the past. Usually, the spirits Aang meets become helpful once he helps them with their trauma. However, Wan Shi Tong discovers Aang and Sokka using the knowledge of a solar eclipse to plan an attack on the Fire Nation. This leads to Wan Shi Tong destroying his library and attempting to kill the protagonists. Wan Shi Tong is another example of information control.

In Chapter Two I discuss how the spirits present in the show fight back against the Fire Nation. I argue that the spirits are representative of environmental devastation as well as environmental justice. As they helped the spirits, the protagonists began to undo the damage and destruction brought by the Fire Nation. In this section, I draw upon spirits such as Hei Bai and Tui as well as episodes in which characters use the spirits to protect and defend their environment, such as Huu from “The Swamp” and Katara in “The Painted Lady.”

In There is Power in Numbers I analyze how nonbenders, the characters who are unable to bend any element, are able to fight in *Avatar*. Because they are unable to bend, nonbenders rely on traditional fighting with weapons. For example, Sokka trains across all the nations and becomes a master swordsman under the mentorship of Piando, a Fire Nation nonbender and White Lotus member. There are also the Kyoshi Warriors who use Avatar Kyoshi’s style of

fighting with an armored robe, face paint, and a metal fan. I argue that the nonbenders in *Avatar* are directly comparable to the average person in the real world who are not born into wealth or privilege. By using online resources such as YouTube and social media sites as well as libraries with resources available to anyone, the average person is able to resist and fight back against corporations like Disney and Amazon.

The next section, Influence & Wealth, I focus on the characters of Iroh, Toph, Mai, and Ty Lee. Iroh is the older brother of Firelord Ozai and the uncle of Zuko. In his younger years, Iroh was a General in the Fire Nation and heir to the Fire Nation throne. He was an oppressor and invader to the Earth Kingdom. However, Iroh uses the knowledge he has of the nations, bending, and spirits to guide Zuko into becoming a Firelord that could undo the harm and destruction of the last hundred years. Without Iroh's influence, Zuko would not have been able to completely change sides and become an ally to Aang and the rest of the protagonists. It is with Iroh and Zuko's help and knowledge of the Fire Nation that they defeat the Fire Nation and bring the war to an end. Toph, Mai, and Ty Lee also impact the outcome of the war due to their similar backgrounds. Toph comes from one of the wealthiest families in the Earth Kingdom while Mai and Ty Lee are both from noble families in the Fire Nation. Toph uses her family's name and reputation to open doors for the protagonists that they would not have access to otherwise. Mai and Ty Lee also directly influence how the war ends because Mai chooses to let Zuko and the rest of the protagonists go instead of killing them. This leads to Ty Lee preventing Azula from killing Mai and eventually joining the Kyoshi Warriors. These examples of having influential and wealthy people bringing down a corrupt government are similar to the real world. In the real world, it is also necessary to use a well-established and well-known name to bring issues to the

forefront and enact significant change. There are people such as Abigail Disney and Mackenzie Scott who use their positions of privilege to help those less fortunate.

Chapter Three centers entirely on the trauma of four characters: Aang, Zuko, Katara, and Jet. Aang, as the main character of the series, is the last airbender in the *Avatar* universe. His people were killed by the Fire Nation shortly after the previous avatar, Roku, died. There are several examples of Aang coming to terms with the fact that he is the only one left. How he reacts to this knowledge that indicate he is deeply traumatized by it. I paired Aang's trauma with Zuko's because on a spiritual level Aang and Zuko are parallels of each other. Zuko's maternal great-grandfather was Avatar Roku who is also a previous reincarnation of Aang. Zuko is traumatized by the Fire Nation and specifically his father and younger sister, Azula. While Zuko eventually is able to see past his family's manipulation and his misguided loyalty to the Fire Nation, he also becomes Aang's firebending teacher. This relationship is incredibly apt because Aang did not want to learn firebending after he burned Katara with it. And as Zuko is permanently scarred by firebending, it is a perfect example of overcoming trauma and fears.

The next pair I discuss are Katara and Jet. Katara and Jet are both victims of Fire Nation raids. Katara lost her mother while Jet lost both his parents. This trauma dramatically impacted who they became as they grew up. Katara became a mother figure and deeply attached to helping others as well as her culture. In one episode she meets a survivor of a Fire Nation raid that occurred during her grandmother's adolescence. At first, Katara is overjoyed to learn waterbending from Hama. However, it is revealed that Hama has been using bloodbending, a form of waterbending, against the Fire Nation villagers she lives with. Katara is forced to use it in order to stop Hama. She only uses it once more out of revenge for her mother.

Initially Jet had a similar development in the creation of the Freedom Fighters and becoming their leader. However, he is blinded by his hatred of firebenders and seeks to destroy them regardless of the innocent civilians who also would be killed. Eventually, Jet realizes the error of his ways and attempts to rebuild his life as an Earth Kingdom refugee in Ba Sing Se. However, he is re-traumatized by the Dai Li and is one of the only deaths shown in *Avatar*.

It is important to recognize the trauma involved in the world of *Avatar* because it is a direct result of the Fire Nation's imperialism and quest to control the rest of the nations. It is also clearly shown that imperialism creates its own enemies by allowing war crimes like genocide, raids, unlawful imprisonment, and a total control over civilians' lives.

CHAPTER 1: Race & Historical Context in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

In *Avatar*, each of the four nations is named after an element. There is the Fire Nation, the Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, and the Air nomads. In each nation, there are benders and non-benders. Benders are able to manipulate an element while non-benders cannot. To balance and guide the nations, there is an Avatar. The Avatar is the only person who can bend all four elements. They also have a strong connection to the Spirit World. The Avatar is reincarnated in a cycle: Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. Normally, the four nations coexist in peace under their respective governments and the Avatar. However, in the last century, with the disappearance of the Avatar, the Fire Nation conquered and colonized the other three nations. The start of the hundred-year war began with Firelord Sozin eliminating all of the Air nomads because the previous Avatar, Roku, died, and the Avatar was reborn into the Air nomads. Firelord Sozin knew that the only real threat to his dream of expanding the Fire Nation was the Avatar. Thus, by committing genocide against them, he believed he eliminated the Avatar. Obviously, he failed to do so as Aang, the last airbender, survived the genocide.

Yet, the Avatar disappeared for the last hundred years and with his absence, the common people have no hope of stopping the Fire Nation's efforts to conquer the rest of the nations. Without a powerful and influential leader to oppose the Fire Nation, they were able to impose their own laws and policies onto the other nations, primarily the Earth Kingdom. The Fire Nation mirrors imperialistic practices used by Imperial Japan which creates the roles of colonizer and oppressor as well as colonized and victim. Although, there are certain characters such as Iroh, Firelord Ozai's older brother, and the exiled prince of the Fire Nation, Zuko, who attempt to undo the Fire Nation's imperialistic practices.

The world of *Avatar* is clearly inspired by the continent of Asia. In the show, the writing in various scrolls and in the beginning and end credits is Chinese. The bending and fighting styles depicted in the show are also of Chinese origin. However, China is not the only Asian influence present. In this section, I argue that the creators of *Avatar* ascribe race to the characters using cultural signifiers and by using historical parallels to clearly place the Fire Nation as Imperial Japan. It is important to acknowledge the Fire Nation as Imperial Japan because it places the other nations, primarily the Earth Kingdom, the Southern Water Tribe, and the Airbenders as the colonized and victims of the Fire Nation in a similar fashion that Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria were to Imperial Japan. However, there are debates about which time period the Fire Nation mirrors. Gene Yang, a Chinese American author and writer of *Promise*, an *Avatar* comic, believes the Fire Nation mirrors the Meiji Restoration while Chelsea Liddell argues that the Fire Nation specifically represents Japan in World War Two.

While the creators used Asian influences to create the *Avatar* world and the characters, it is debatable how exactly *Avatar* is Asian. Francis Agnoli argues that the characters are racially ascribed Asian by the audience. Agnoli states that

Cultural markers signify and project identity that iconic facial features alone cannot.

Therefore, when clothes from the Tang Dynasty are transformed into Ba Sing Se high fashion, when the third eye of Shiva becomes the third eyes of Combustion Man and P'Li, and when women's active wear of 1920s and 1930s United States inspires one of Zhu Li's outfits, those adaptations position the corresponding characters in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts. (Agnoli 108-109).

It is not only the skin tone or facial features that force the audience to think of the characters as Asian. It is the clothes, the hairstyles, even the weapons they use that ascribe a specific race to

the character. There are two main examples of this that are prevalent in *Avatar*. The Earth Kingdom refugees, specifically Song and her mother, and Zuko.

Song is a minor character in *Avatar*. She appears in one episode, “The Cave of Two Lovers.” In the subplot of the episode the audience experiences Zuko not as the angry exiled Fire Nation prince but as another victim of the Fire Nation. During this episode, Zuko and his uncle Iroh, older brother to Firelord Ozai, are posing as Earth Kingdom refugees. It is ironic that they do so because they were the colonizer/oppressor and now, as traitors of the Fire Nation, they become the colonized/victim. It is interesting that Iroh specifically poses as a refugee because prior to his banishment with Zuko, he attempted to invade the Earth Kingdom capital, Ba Sing Se. There are several instances like this concerning both Iroh and Zuko in which their roles are reversed. Zuko primarily goes between an oppressor and victim several times before finally settling into his role as an ally to the protagonists.

What truly is intriguing about this episode is how Zuko relates to Song. Song’s village was raided by the Fire Nation. As a result of the raid, her leg is badly scarred from the Fire Nation soldiers. Zuko is able to relate to her scarring because he has a large facial scar on the left side of his face: “Zuko is particularly struck by her story as he too bears physical scars as a result of his questioning the ideology of the Fire Nation” (Liddell 30). His father, Firelord Ozai, burned it because he questioned a general’s military tactics of sending new soldiers as bait to the Earth Kingdom so that the experienced units could ambush the Earth Kingdom soldiers on the other side. In this sense, Zuko is a victim of his nation’s imperialism in a similar way to Song. Liddell discusses that “Song and her mother are presented wearing hanbok, traditional Korean clothing. Though Chinese influences are the most obviously present in the characterization of the Earth Kingdom, in the clothing, architecture, and writing systems to name a few, the Earth Kingdom

can also be said to represent all the colonial acknowledgement of the role Korea played in Japan's empire" (Liddell 30). Therefore, *Avatar* uses cultural signifiers based upon real Asian cultures to create the roles of oppressor and colonizer as well as victim and colonized.



Fig. 1 Song (*Avatar*)



Fig. 2 Model wearing a traditional Korean hanbok (Wang)

Zuko also has cultural signifiers in his design. The reason the creators placed a scar on Zuko's face was to prevent him from appearing as a skinhead: "In this recounting, Coleman wanted to transform a real-world referent – the shaved scalp of a young skinhead – into a signifier of intensity. Such a visual would also be accompanied by additional connotations of white supremacist movements" (Agnoli 110). While the creators, both white men, simply wanted to change Zuko's design from a skinhead to something less intense, "...port-wine stains specifically signified Asian-ness, to the extent that Zuko's similarly colored and positioned scar carried the same connotations" (Agnoli 110). Edwin Zane was the cultural consultant for *Avatar* who recognized Zuko's scar as an Asian signifier. Agnoli also examines Zuko's original design:

Original concepts featured overt adaptations of Japanese and samurai referements for his (Zuko) armor and hairstyle, in turn marking the Fire Nation as Japanese in opposition to the more Chinese-inspired Earth Kingdom. Upon seeing these designs, cultural consultant Edwin Zane warned Nickelodeon ‘This might be interpreted or translated as Japanese are bad and all other Asian people are good’ (Agnoli 109).



Fig. 3 Zuko (Avatar)

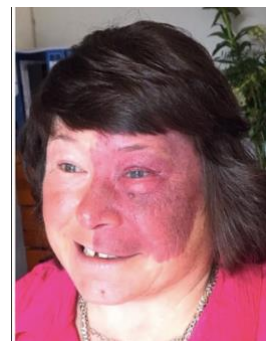


Fig. 4 Ex. of a Port Wine Stain Birthmark (@VeilCoverCream)

With this in mind, it is clear that the Fire Nation is meant to be Japan. Yet, in his original design Zuko was representative of a completely different era of Japanese history than what Liddell or Yang believe it to represent. What is also interesting is that Zane’s warning only applied to the Japanese inspired Fire Nation which is somewhat ironic because “...this decision to center Chinese referents for multiple fantasy cultures does position China as synecdochic for Asia” (Agnoli 157). While the creators attempted to separate the Fire Nation from Japan, they unintentionally made the Chinese inspired Earth Kingdom, bending styles, and writing system a stand-in for Asia.

Avatar clearly uses real-life Asian countries, specifically Japan, China, and Korea, to create a sense of race. It is no wonder then that the history of those countries is important to acknowledge in order to understand what roles each of the four nations have in *Avatar*. Liddell writes that “The imperial rhetoric of the Fire Nation bears numerous similarities to the ideology of the Imperial Japanese government before and during the Second World War. Though the

mindset of the Fire Nation Empire becomes apparent through the actions of its people, the most obvious voicing of it comes from Fire Lord Sozin, the founder of the empire” (Liddell 14).

Firelord Sozin discusses his plans for the Fire Nation with Avatar Roku, his childhood best friend:

“Our nation is enjoying an unprecedented time of peace and wealth. Our people are happy. And we’re so fortunate in so many ways” (“The Avatar and the Firelord”)

Avatar Roku asks “Where are you going with this?” (“The Avatar and the Firelord”)

Sozin continues: “We should share this prosperity with the rest of the world. In our hands is the most successful empire in history and it’s time we expanded it.” (“The Avatar and the Firelord”)

To his credit, Roku rejects Sozin’s plan. However, Sozin did not accept that. He invaded and occupied parts of the Earth Kingdom. Sozin challenged Roku to a battle. Roku spared his life. Yet, when Roku needed help getting off an erupting volcano, Sozin let him die. It was after Roku’s death that Sozin continued his ‘expansion’ into the Earth Kingdom, killed nearly all the Southern Tribe waterbenders, and killed all the Airbenders and nomads except for Aang, the Avatar after Roku.

The time period Yang states is reminiscent of Japan is the Meiji Restoration. It was a time of rapid industrialization in Japan and pushed for the acceptance of Western ideologies, a movement known as Bummei Kaika. It directly led to Japan colonizing Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria in World War Two as well as invading pacific Asian countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Singapore. This is important to acknowledge because the policies the Fire Nation enforces against the colonized parts of the Earth Kingdom and in their invasion of the other nations mirror the same policies the Japanese used against the countries they colonized and

invaded. Liddell explains how the ideologies between the Imperial Japanese Empire and the Fire Nation are similar:

Firstly, the Japanese shared a cultural and racial affinity with the other Asiatic nations. No longer would the Asian peoples have to bow and scrape to the white imperial powers, rather Japan would create an Asian bloc by and for Asians. Secondly, in traditional Confucian morality, every person had a proper place and occupation, and the Japanese believed that theirs was as the leader of this brave new Asiatic world. Thirdly, the Japanese already portrayed the Emperor as the god-like founder of their own race, and it was only logical that he should also rule over the other nations of Asia. Lastly, it was believed by many that the Japanese possessed a unique talent for assimilation. They had imported Western technology in the mid-nineteenth century and rapidly incorporated and adapted it to suit their own needs. For this reason, the Japanese thought that they could build a new society where every race had its proper place and all the cultures of Asia were united as one. (Liddell 14-15).

In a similar fashion, the Fire Nation is connected to the rest of the nations by being one of the four elements. The Fire Nation believes it is the superior element with the Firelord as their imperial god. Out of the four nations, the Fire Nation is the most industrialized, specifically in regards to their military. The Fire Nation has metal warships and uses steam power while both the Northern and Southern Water Tribes use traditional cloth sails and wooden boats.

There is also the matter of the Fire Nation education system. In “The Headband”, the protagonists all disguise themselves as Fire Nation. Unfortunately for Aang, his disguise is a school uniform. At the Fire Nation school, he learns that the students recite an oath every day: “My life I give to my country. With my hands I fight for Firelord Ozai and our forefathers before

him. With my mind I seek ways to better my country. And with my feet may our March of Civilization continue” (“The Headband”). This oath brings to mind the Imperial Rescript on Education from the Meiji restoration in 1890:

Know ye, Our Subjects:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore, advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial state; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may all attain to the same virtue.

While the oath from the Fire Nation is much shorter, it shares the same message. Their leader, Emperor or Firelord, is god-like and each citizen must be completely loyal to him and never question their decisions. This pledge was also used in Korea while it was under Japanese control.

The Fire Nation does not hide the war. They censor the true information and create propaganda for their citizens. For example, in “The Headband” the Fire Nation teacher insists that the Air Nomads, Aang’s own people, had a formal military. When Aang corrects her, the teacher refuses to believe him because that is not what is written in their national history book, which was a book created to provide a national sense of pride and unquestionable honor. A book that was built upon fabrications of the hundred-year war. All of the information in the book is censored to make the war justified. The truth of it-why Sozin started it, why the other nations counterattacked, and that Roku tried to stop it from happening-are ignored. This is startlingly similar to how the Japanese government refuses to acknowledge their role in erasing Korean culture. While Korea was under Japanese control, Korean cultural beliefs were forbidden. Alexander Chee writes, “My grandmother admired my grandfather for standing up to his teacher at school, insisting on the importance of ancestor worship for Koreans-something I had heard before, but now know could have sent him to jail or cost him his life” (Chee). In a similar practice, the Fire Nation banned earthbending from their colonies in the Earth Kingdom.

Obviously, the target audience watching *Avatar* are most likely not aware of the cultural inspirations that the creators used to make the *Avatar* world. However, it is important to recognize where the fictional world comes from because as the audience grows older, they will be able to make connections between *Avatar* and the history of the real world. They will also have developed the ability to recognize an imperialistic state because of how clearly the Fire Nation is presented as ruthless conquerors. However, *Avatar* also uses complex narrative

storytelling to provide nuance to the Fire Nation. They do this primarily through Zuko. As Fire Nation royalty, he is supposed to be a role model for Fire Nation citizens. But because of his banishment, he is not. Yet, he is still loyal to the Fire Nation and their beliefs about honor. Zuko is shown throughout the series to have the capacity to change. The best example of this is when he freed Appa, Aang's sky bison (and the only one in existence), instead of kidnapping or killing him. While Zuko does not join the protagonists until season three, the narrative provides ample reasons as to why someone who grew up in an imperialistic state (and an abusive family) would struggle to switch sides. All Zuko wants prior to season three is for his family to accept him and for his father to reinstate his honor. Despite his uncle Iroh accepting him as he is, Zuko's only goal is to find the Avatar so that he can regain his honor and status within the royal family. Once Zuko is able to realize that his father and sister both manipulate him for their own wants, he is able to understand how the Fire Nation is in the wrong, and he actively works against his home country in order to restore honor to it by becoming the new Firelord.

CHAPTER 1: THE DAI LI

The Dai Li and the Fire Nation have startling similarities in *Avatar*. The Dai Li were originally meant to preserve and guide the Earth Kingdom's culture. They were established by Avatar Kyoshi as cultural protectors of the Earth Kingdom. However, by the time of the series they are akin to a secret police.

The Dai Li ensured that the citizens within the walls were not aware of the war happening quite literally outside its walls. They are well-trained, organized, and efficient-the very same qualities the Fire Nation military prides itself on. The Dai Li's control over Ba Sing Se, the capital of the Earth Kingdom, makes the transfer of control to Azula, princess of the Fire Nation, seamless.

Long Feng, the leader of the Dai Li, wants the Earth Kingdom to stay as it is. He says "In silencing talk of conflict, Ba Sing Se remains a peaceful, orderly utopia: the last one on Earth" ("City of Walls and Secrets"). Throughout the episode "City of Walls and Secrets" this is shown to not be true. The citizens are aware of the war but their fear of the Dai Li prompts them to never mention it. For example, Aang and the rest of the protagonists are housed in the upper ring of Ba Sing Se where the Earth Kingdom nobility lives. As the protagonists are guests of the Earth King, they are given a tour guide named Joo Dee.

The protagonists' neighbor watches them carefully and when loudly asked about Appa, Aang's missing flying bison, he denies any knowledge of the outside world because Joo Dee acts as the Dai Li's eyes and ears and warns the neighbor with significant facial expressions not to tell the protagonists anything. However, the neighbor does warn them: "Shh, listen, you can't mention the War here. And whatever you do, stay away from the Dai Li" ("City of Walls and

Secrets”). It is impossible to stay away from the Dai Li as they are able to hide in plain sight and vanish quickly.

The Dai Li are reminiscent of the surveillance states in the modern world. Viswanath writes that “In order to effect this silencing, the Dai Li operates through an efficient and sophisticated system of micro-surveillance of all refugees and new immigrants to the city, punishing/disciplining anyone who dares to transgress the code of silence” (Viswanath 39-40). While the Dai Li are fictional, the United States, and other superpowers such as China and Russia, are the Dai Li on a global scale. However, due to the Dai Li’s complete control of Ba Sing Se through espionage, kidnapping, and brainwashing it is difficult not to think of modern governments in the same light. Toomey and Gorksi write that:

In an increasingly interconnected world, Americans’ communications and data are frequently sent or routed abroad, where they’re vulnerable to collection by the NSA. The government has used this authority to tap into the links between Google’s data centers overseas, and to vacuum up 5 billion records per day on the location of cell phones around the world...

The people who feel the impact the most are Muslims, Black and Brown people, people of Asian descent, and others who have long been subject to wrongful profiling and discrimination in the name of national security. Routine surveillance is corrosive, making us feel like we are always being watched, and it chills the very kind of speech and association on which democracy depends. This spying is especially harmful because it is often feeds into a national security apparatus that puts people on

watchlists, subjects them to unwarranted scrutiny by law enforcement, and allows the government to upend lives on the basis of vague, secret claims (Toomey and Gorksi).

And in Russia: "...SORM-1 system captures telephone and mobile phone communications, SORM-2 intercepts Internet traffic, and SORM-3 collects information from all forms of communication, providing long-term storage of all information and data on subscribers, including actual recordings and locations" (Soldatove and Borogan 25). The Russian government is also allowed to investigate "Institutions providing public access to the Internet-schools, libraries, Internet cafés, and even post offices..." (Soldatove and Borogan 28) on the off-chance that they have software that may allow banned websites.

The press is equally censored all over the world. Reporters hold hidden agendas, news companies present biased information, and create facades of politicians to gain public support for them. In an article by the Harvard Business Review Vanderwicken quotes Mort Rosenblum, an Associated Press special correspondent, who "[sic] quotes Reuvan Frank, a former president of NBC News, as asserting, 'News is whatever the goddamn government says it is'" (Vanderwicken). This worryingly brings to mind Long Feng and the Fire Nation. Any news is tightly controlled and censored to present the message the government wants. For the United States, that actually means it is whatever message major corporations want: Fox, Disney, National Amusements (Paramount Global), Comcast (which owns NBC and NBC Universal), and Warner Bros. The big three of American news companies are Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. Fox News is owned by Fox, CNN is owned by Warner Bros., and MSNBC is owned by NBC. While there are still reputable unbiased news sites such as NPR, it is becoming increasingly difficult to trust news sources as they all seem untrustworthy because they do not report news for the sake of informing citizens but to push a political agenda. The Dai Li teach

children to be aware of the media and news they receive by showing how the civilians and foreigners in Ba Sing Se are treated. By doing so, it demonstrates why searching for unbiased news sources and using multiple sources is necessary to fully understand global events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

CHAPTER 1: ABUSE OF KNOWLEDGE

In “The Library,” the Fire Nation destroys their section in Wan Shi Tong’s library, a vast collection of rare and irreplaceable texts. By doing this, the Fire Nation denies the rest of the world access to their history and thus denies their enemies, like Aang and his friends, the ability to strategize a way to defeat the Fire Nation and the Fire Lord. Viswanath notes that: “Already quite inaccessible, the Library, in order to further escape the surveillance of the Fire-Nation and others, goes underground. It is an underground library, buried under the desert. In response to the destructive use of knowledge/power, the Spirit Wan Shi Tong resists further destruction of the library by sinking it underground” (Viswanath 32). It is in this sense that Wan Shi Tong would rather hide his collection from humans who could use it to bring justice for the abuse of his library.

Wan Shi Tong has allowed humans to use his library ever since he brought the library out of the spirit world. However, the audience learns in “The Siege of the North: Part 1” that it was Zhao who Wan Shi Tong mentions in “The Library” as an example of how humans mistreat the knowledge he collects. Zhao discovered that the moon and ocean spirits live in the human world in Wan Chi Tong’s library. With this knowledge, Zhao killed the moon spirit. Wan-Chi Tong attempts to kill Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Zei in order to prevent them from using the knowledge of a solar eclipse against the Fire Nation despite the Fire Nation’s atrocities against the other three nations. The Fire Nation destroyed nearly every piece of knowledge that could potentially lead to their downfall, and Zhao was allowed to use the information he gained from Wan Shi Tong’s library.

While it is understandable that a spirit like Wan Shi Tong would not trust humans with his library, it is interesting that he denies them the ability to use the information they gain from

it. By not allowing Aang and Sokka to use what little advantage they found over the Fire Nation, Wan Shi Tong would allow the Fire Nation to continue the war and invasions as Aang would not be able to develop a strategy against them.

CHAPTER 2: THE SPIRITS STRIKE BACK

It is clear in the very beginning of *Avatar* that the Spirit World and the spirits that primarily reside in it play a key role in maintaining the balance between the four elements and the four nations. This is seen in several episodes such as “Winter Solstice Part 1: The Spirit World”, “The Siege of the North, Part Two”, “The Blue Spirit”, “The Swamp” and “The Painted Lady.”

In “Winter Solstice Part 1: The Spirit World”, Aang and his friends, Katara and Sokka, fly over a burned down forest. From above in the sky, the burned down forest resembles a scar (“Winter Solstice Part 1: The Spirit World”). They decide to stop and examine the area. It is clear that the Fire Nation destroyed the forest. To cheer Aang up about the guilt he feels for being unable to prevent this disaster, Katara says, “These acorns are everywhere, Aang. That means the forest will grow back. Every one of these will be a tall oak tree someday and all the birds and animals that lived here will come back” (“Winter Solstice Part 1: The Spirit World”). It is important to note the environmental destruction because it is part of the story and also forces the audience to consider how the natural world recovers from such a brutal attack.

While it is not stated why the forest was burned down, there is an Earth Kingdom village nearby. Presumably, the Fire Nation burned the forest down to prevent the village from using the natural resources it provides such as building materials like lumber and stone and food from the wild animals, fruit and vegetation. The forest was a natural resource and physical block to the village, and without it, the village is vulnerable to future raids.

The consequence of the Fire Nation burning down the forest is that it angered the spirit that protected the it, Hei Bai. Normally, Hei Bai is a tame panda. However, Hei Bai is introduced as a monstrous being because he believed that the Earth Kingdom village had burnt his forest

down and enacted revenge against them. Once Aang communicates that it was the Fire Nation that had destroyed his forest and that the forest will grow back, Hei Bai becomes tame once again and releases the Earth Kingdom villagers (and Sokka) who he kidnapped in revenge. Aang tells Hei Bai, “You’re the spirit of this forest. Now I understand. You’re upset and angry because your home was burned down. When I saw the forest had burned, I was sad and upset, but my friend gave me hope that the forest will grow back” (Winter Solstice Part 1: The Spirit World).



Fig. 5 Hei Bai's angered form (Avatar)



Fig. 6 Hei Bai's tame form (Avatar)

What is shown in this episode is that despite the Fire Nation’s best efforts to destroy a natural part of their world, the forest will regrow and continue to provide for the village. It is a message about a hopeful future amidst devastation.

Another devastating blow to the spirits and balance of the world occurs in “The Siege of the North: Part 2.” In the previous episode, Admiral Zhao, a minor antagonist in the series, says, “I was a young lieutenant serving under General Xu in the Earth Kingdom. I discovered a hidden library, underground in fact. I tore through scroll after scroll. One of them contained a detail illustration and the words ‘moon’ and ‘ocean’. I knew then that these spirits could be found and killed. And that it was my destiny to do so” (“The Siege of the North: Part 1”). Zhao does not respect the spirit world or the spirits. He does not understand that the world has a natural balance to it and to disrupt it brings consequences to each element.

Iroh seemingly prevents Zhao from killing the moon spirit by threatening him:

“I’m no traitor, Zhao, the Fire Nation needs the moon, too; we all depend on the balance.

Whatever you do to that spirit I’ll unleash on you ten-fold. Let it go, now!” (“The Siege of the North: Part 2”). Zhao does let the moon spirit go. However, almost instantly he lashes out with his firebending and kills it. The death of Tui threw the entire world out of balance because the waterbenders lost their spiritual connection to their bending and left the firebenders overpowered because they still had access to their bending. The balance is restored by Yue, the princess of the Northern Water Tribe, by sacrificing herself and becoming the moon spirit and thus giving the waterbenders their bending back.

Because Iroh did not condone Zhao’s slaughter of the moon spirit, Ozai sends Azula, Zuko’s sister, to capture Iroh and Zuko. She tells them, “I’ve come with a message from home. Father’s changed his mind. Family is suddenly very important to him. He’s heard of plans to overthrow him; treacherous plots. Family are the only ones you can really trust. Father regrets your banishment. He wants you home” (“The Avatar State”). Zuko nearly falls for Azula traps, however, the captain of the ship accidentally lets it slip that Iroh and Zuko are prisoners, not guests. It is significant that this exchange between the royal family occurs because it shows that even when Iroh and Zuko choose the morally right decision, there are still consequences they have to face. They are not rewarded for working against Zhao and letting Aang go. It is the bare minimum they can do to ensure the world does not collapse due to the disrespect the Fire Nation repeatedly treats spirits and the natural environment with.

In “The Swamp” Aang, Katara, and Sokka are pulled into a giant swamp by a tornado. They become separated from each other and then find each other again at the center of the swamp. This is where they meet Huu, a waterbender, who hid himself in a giant vine form with a

mask that resembled a spirit's face. Huu uses the vines from the swamp to appear as a wrathful spirit to anyone who hurts the swamp. He tells Sokka, "I protect the swamp from folks that want to hurt it, like this fella with his big knife" ("The Swamp"). The swamp itself is isolated from the rest of the world. The rest of the waterbenders in the swamp don't use a disguise. They use leaves as their clothes and their accents are similar to that of the stereotypical redneck. Unlike Zuko, Huu doesn't need to disguise himself. The swampbenders all know each other and are not loyal to any nation. But because spirits are something most people fear, he uses the vine disguise. This disguise even fools Aang who as the avatar is the bridge between the material world and the spirit world. Spirits are intimidating to an average person because they aren't well known. The ones that are known are vengeful and monstrous due to the acts of people like Zhao who don't respect or value how they balance the world. What is interesting is that even though the vine spirit is Huu, the swamp is clearly a spiritual place. Aang, Katara, and Sokka all see someone in it. Katara sees her mother. Sokka sees the moon spirit, and Aang sees his future earthbending teacher.

In "The Blue Spirit" the audience follows a 'spirit' with a blue and white face as they free Aang from Admiral Zhao. At the end of the episode it's revealed that Zuko is the blue spirit. While Zuko clearly freed Aang only to capture him for himself, this isn't the only instance of Zuko disguised as the blue spirit. The disguise provides Zuko anonymity. He is no longer the exiled scarred prince of the Fire Nation. He is an independent entity. As a 'spirit' Zuko is able to act on his own will and desire without anyone questioning his loyalty to the Fire Nation. As Zuko, he can only act on his quest for the Avatar. Viswanath writes that "Realising that these methods would result in his arrest/capture and further scar his identity, he reconfigures and re-articulates resistance through silence and secrecy. He 'disguises' and 'masquerades' in order to

mask his body into the form of the ‘Blue Spirit’” (Viswanath 35). As the blue spirit, he is able to question and rebel against the Fire Nation. It is important to note that as the blue spirit, Zuko does not firebend. He only uses his dual swords and physical abilities. This further shows that Zuko uses the disguise of a spirit because spirits are not tied to a specific nation. Even Tui and La are not only tied to waterbending, as the audience sees in the “Siege of the North” episodes. Zuko as the blue spirit is testing his freedom and his morality because he is unable to do so in any other form because of the Fire Nation’s excessive focus on duty and honor. He only stops using the blue spirit as a representation of himself because he begins to fundamentally change into who he is as the spirit.

In the last episode, it is Katara who disguises herself as a spirit. This is important to note because it is a good example of how to help victims on a small scale. Despite the many issues stemming from the Fire Nation government, the protagonists are able to help restore and heal a small village. In this episode, the protagonists stop by a town that is in the middle of a river. According to the local ferryman, it is built like that “Because we’re a fishing town. At least that’s how it was before the factory moved in. Army makes their metal there. Moved in a few years ago and started gunking up our river. Now our little village is struggling to survive” (“The Painted Lady”). A Fire Nation factory is located very close to the river village. The factory runoff is causing major pollution issues and causing the village people to become ill.

What is interesting about this town is that they have a local legend about a spirit: “The painted lady. She’s part of our town’s lore. They say she’s a water spirit who watches over our town in times of need. I always thought she was just a legend. Until now” (“The Painted Lady”). Throughout the episode, Katara dresses as the local spirit and provides the village with medicine

and food. The village becomes more lively as they began to believe in the Painted Lady once more.

However, because it is not an actual spirit helping the village but Katara dressed as one, once they leave, the village will not be able to sustain themselves. Sokka says “Yeah, now, but without her, they wouldn’t be able to fend for themselves. If she really wanted to help, she would use her spirit magic to blow up that factory” (“The Painted Lady”). The factory is the root cause of their problems and as long as it runs, it poses a threat to the village.

Katara and Aang blow up the Fire Nation factory in the hopes it will solve the village’s problems. While it does for the immediate future, it also causes Fire Nation soldiers to descend into the village to discover where their supplies went and who destroyed their factory. The Fire Nation soldier in charge tells the villagers: “I thought we could live as neighbors in peace but I guess I was wrong. You steal our food, our medicine, and then you destroy our factory” (“The Painted Lady”). He goes on to say, “This is a town of thieves and liars. Where’s your Painted Lady now? We’re going to cure the world of this wretched village” (“The Painted Lady”). He and his lackeys attempt to attack the villagers. However, they are unable to do so because of the combined bending of Katara and Aang. They are able to scare the Fire Nation soldiers away, but Katara is recognized and ridiculed for dressing and acting as the village’s local spirit. Katara acknowledges that “I shouldn’t have acted as someone I wasn’t and I shouldn’t have tricked you. But I felt like I had to do something. It doesn’t matter if the Painted Lady is real or not. Because your problems are real, and this river is real. You can’t wait around for someone to help you. You have to help yourself” (“The Painted Lady”). This is an important statement because Katara does not blame the villagers for being upset that she pretended to be the Painted Lady. She understands their frustrations but encourages them to act on their own without the help of a

spirit. If they do not, their situation will not change and may even become worse. At the end of the episode, the real Painted Lady reveals herself to Katara and thanks her.

All of these episodes centering around the spirits in *Avatar* concern a disaster of some kind caused by the Fire Nation. The spirits are directly connected to their environments and when those environments are destroyed, they react. While they do not always understand who or why their environment was hurt by, they do act as a sentient environmental force against the imperialistic Fire Nation. They are also usually protected and defended by Aang and the rest of the protagonists because of their specific role of guarding environments and maintaining the balance of the world. The one outlier to this as discussed above is Wan Chi Tong who attacked the protagonists due to past disrespect and destruction from the Fire Nation.

These spirit-focused episodes open the target audience, children, to environmental imperialism and activism. By seeing Aang treating the spirits with respect, even when the spirit is angry, the show provides an understanding of how environments can be destroyed as well as fought for and brought back to its previous natural state. *Avatar* also deliberately includes a polluted river and how organizing efforts to clean it restores the river. However, *Avatar* makes the important distinction that unless the root cause of the pollution is stopped, the environment will continue to struggle.

CHAPTER 2: THERE IS POWER IN NUMBERS

In *Avatar*, not every person is gifted with the ability to bend the elements. These people are called nonbenders. Katara's brother, Sokka, is a nonbender. Throughout the series, the protagonists meet several nonbenders such as Suki and the Kyoshi Warriors, The Freedom Fighters, a group of Earth Kingdom refugees living in a former Airbender temple, and Piando. Of the nonbenders the protagonists meet, most utilize some form of weapon fighting. The exception to this are the group of Earth Kingdom refugees living in the former Airbender temple. Their leader, the Mechanist, uses technological inventions to adapt to the Airbender temple, which includes creating a way of flying like airbenders but without the use of bending. There are a few things that are interesting to note about this phenomenon in the *Avatar* world. The first is that of all the benders the audience is shown throughout the series only Zuko is shown to use both weapons and bending. As Viswanath notes, "He problematizes the identity conflict between 'benders' and 'non-benders' and allows scope for non-benders to resist" (Viswanath 36). This is exactly how nonbenders resist and fight back in a world of benders. Azula, Zuko's sister, uses two nonbenders, Ty Lee and Mai, as her lackeys. Ty Lee is able to chi-block, which temporarily paralyzes muscles and prevents benders from being able to bend. She is also trained in acrobatics and as a contortionist as she used to work at a circus. Mai is trained to use stilettos, throwing knives, and sai (is this the right word?) with deadly precision. She uses her clothing, a dress with long sleeves, to hide her many weapons.

Sokka is the eldest male in the Southern Water Tribe. The adult men either died during the Fire Nation raids or, like his and Katara's father, left to fight the Fire Nation. To respect his father's wishes, Sokka trained himself to fight according to the Southern Water Tribe tradition A tradition that includes war paint, a club, and a hairstyle that he calls a warrior's wolf tail. As

Sokka is the eldest male in the Tribe, he takes on the role of teaching the male children how to fight. While the children are young, they face a very real threat from the Fire Nation. This threat explains why Sokka is antagonistic to Aang and strict with the boys he teaches.

The Fire Nation has conducted several raids against the Southern Water Tribe. They started when Sokka's grandmother was a young adult. The Fire Nation invaded and the waterbenders would fight back. However, each raid the Fire Nation captured more and more waterbenders until there were none left. When Sokka was ten and Katara eight, their mother was killed by a Fire Nation soldier as she claimed to be the only waterbender in the village. She did so to protect Katara. This left both of them and their father devastated. They were both forced to mature quickly in order to protect what remained of their village.

Sokka became the village protector while Katara took on a traditional feminine motherly role. Throughout the series, Sokka learns and improves his fighting and weapons. The first place he trained at was Kyoshi Island after he, Katara, and Aang were captured by the Kyoshi Warriors. The Kyoshi Warriors' leader, Suki, is an expert at fighting in an armored dress, make-up, and with a metal fan. The Kyoshi Warriors are modeled after Avatar Kyoshi who was the Avatar before Roku. She created Kyoshi Island and founded the Kyoshi Warriors to protect it. Viswanath argues that:

It is also used as an identification; an identification with the Avatar, a figure that secures territorial integrity during the time of an external and internal threat. Yet, it is a mimic of the Avatar in the past, whose absence is compensated through a deliberate presence of multiple Kyoshis. This could also be read as a response to the overall dejection and betrayal felt by them because of the disappearance of Avatar Aang for over a hundred years" (Viswanath 37-38).

The Kyoshi warriors do represent a dozen or so identical Kyoshi's. It is an example of how to protect one area from imperial forces while also protecting their identity. They also honor the Avatar and remind the people around them that there is still hope for the Avatar's return.



Fig. 7 Sokka in Southern Water Tribe war paint (Avatar)



Fig. 8 Suki in Kyoshi make-up (Avatar)

The protagonists next meet The Freedom Fighters. They all use a different form of weapon fighting. Jet, their leader, uses hook swords. The rest use brute strength, similar hook swords, and clubs. Their goal as Freedom Fighters is to protect Earth Kingdom villagers and refugees and disrupt the Fire Nation soldiers as much as possible. While Jet becomes an extremist and eventually believes killing innocent people along with firebenders is a necessary sacrifice, the rest do not. The Freedom Fighters are a direct response to Fire Nation imperialism in that they formed this rebellious effort because each of them were victims of a Fire Nation raid.

In “The Northern Air Temple” the protagonists find a group of refugees living in the Northern Air Temple. Their leader, the Mechanist, has renovated the temple and created several inventions that do the same such as the gliders, the candle clock, and a knife sharpening tool that prevents the user from being cut. The renovation and inventions make the temple an easier place to live. The Mechanist's son, Teo, relies on a wheelchair to move. The Mechanist built a glider based on the ones that the airbenders used. This led to everyone having equal access to flying

around the temple. The gliders are not the only invention that is disabled friendly. The candle clock that they use to track time uses a visual and audio reaction. As Kelley writes, “The character Toph, for example, would not be able to look at a candle-clock and tell time. Yet, she could hear the snaps of powder for each hour. Thus, the invention’s design succeeds in providing information for a range of users” (Kelley 66). It is interesting that the creators explored how different disabilities need different accommodations by using the Mechanist, adding to the complexity of the character.

The Mechanist is later revealed to be a collaborator with the Fire Nation. He made weapons for them in order to protect his people and the temple from the Fire Nation. The Mechanist was forced to be a collaborator to the Fire Nation, and his collaboration saved his people and the temple, which allowed him to continue making the temple accommodating for everyone. The Fire Nation is in control of the survival of the temple and the refugees, the Mechanist’s weapons, and who has access to this knowledge. Because the Mechanist is the creator of the weapons, he knows how to use them against the Fire Nation as well as the temple’s natural environment. The Fire Nation did not anticipate this. The Mechanist’s forces are able to force the soldiers to retreat after using bombs, the war balloon, and the knowledge of where the natural gas comes from to cause an explosion. The tanks fall from the hooks that were keeping them on the temple. What is interesting is that weapons on each side (the tanks of the Fire Nation, the war balloon of the protagonists) enable and disable people.

The tanks being used to invade and destroy the temple are nearly indestructible because of how adaptable they are to the environment. The war balloon, as Kelley mentions, is a similar equalizer to the gliders because it provides a way of flying to anyone. However, both of these inventions are used to disable each other. Aang and the protagonists believe that they’ve stopped

the Fire Nation and destroyed the war balloon. However, the Fire Nation finds it and uses the knowledge of it to create more, which is hinted at in the end of the episode.

These episodes highlighting how nonbenders fight back against the Fire Nation are important because it directly relates to the real world. *Avatar* shows how people who do not have a privileged starting point in life can learn how to fight against people who do. Benders can be seen as those born with an inherit privilege-whether that be their skin tone, their gender, or socioeconomic status. Nonbenders represent the majority of average people in the world who are able to learn ways of resisting imperialism. Online protesting through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit is a common way. Local libraries also provide many resources like free computers and WIFI, classes on learning how to code, learning languages, and help with job and career employment. All of these resources are open to everyone regardless of their monetary status.

It is revolutionary to learn these skills because they can be used against the same billionaires that own Twitter, Facebook, and Disney. Disney recently received backlash for not voicing an opinion on the Don't Say Gay Bill until it had already passed. Some of that backlash came from their own creators such as Alex Hirsch and Dana Terrace. When Disney stated that Hirsch's show, *Gravity Falls*, was proof of support for LGBTQ+ representation, Hirsch uploaded a video of all the censoring the show went through-including the removal of a clip that confirmed a gay couple. Learning how to be literate online via social media and even coding is a key tool to not only spread information but also to gather support for causes such as clean water in Flint, Michigan, the unionization of companies like Starbucks, and awareness for climate change as seen by Greta Thunberg's twitter.

CHAPTER 2: INFLUENCE & WEALTH

The protagonists spend the three seasons of the series making a plan to defeat Firelord Ozai. However, without the help of Iroh, not only a prince of the Fire Nation but a General of the White Lotus, their final battle against Ozai would not have gone so smoothly. Similarly, the guidance they received on who should become Firelord after Ozai's defeat would not have been as clear.

Iroh is a key character in the series because without him Zuko would not have been able to challenge his devotion to the Fire Nation and his family. Without Iroh, Zuko does not become Aang's firebending teacher nor does he take the throne to restore the honor of the Fire Nation. It is not demeaning to think of Iroh as a minor support character because that is who he is created to be. He is Zuko's conscience, Zuko's mentor, and Zuko's child-like side. Viswanath discusses how Iroh was able to hide numerous things from the Fire Nation and Zuko:

'Uncle Iroh', as he is called by Zuko, is someone who manipulates his authority and powerful position by strategizing different forms of silence. He maintains the silence and secrets of certain truths from the Fire Nation by using speech – he 'lies' and he engages with a lot of 'humour.' In fact, he is an embodiment of the carnivalesque that operates against the 'official culture', against the 'powered discourse' of the Fire Nation. It is a humour mobilized against the humourless seriousness of the State (Viswanath 34).

Zuko can't express himself as anything but a serious, devoted, and determined person for whatever cause(s) he pursues. However, even Iroh has his limits. After Zuko betrays him in "Crossroads of Destiny" and lets Iroh be imprisoned, Iroh leaves Zuko alone.

During the first season, Iroh plays into the stereotypical comedic relief role of the fat man. Zuko doesn't take well to Iroh's kind and child-like manner. Iroh's constant shenanigans,

such as when he thought he lost his white lotus tile only to find it in his sleeve, are barely tolerated by Zuko. Intentionally or not, they often, lead to Zuko's own interests. For example, Iroh losing his white lotus tile in "The Waterbending Scroll" leads to Zuko finding Aang. During the episode, Zuko makes a deal with the pirates who are after Aang, Katara, and Sokka. Zuko and his crew help the pirates track them down on the condition that the pirates let them have Aang and his friends. The pirates, of course, change their mind and decide to take Aang to the Fire Nation. This leads to the pirates and Zuko fighting with the protagonists caught in the crossfire. It is only after both ships have been destroyed that Iroh finds his tile in his sleeve. While Zuko is angry that Iroh forced him to dock and waste time (and money) to replace the tile, he is angrier that the Avatar has escaped him again, especially because Zhao has taken the quest to find Aang away from Zuko.

From the very beginning, it is clear that Iroh is set as a foil to Zuko. Where Zuko is angry, impatient, and serious, Iroh is calm, level-headed, and freely expresses himself. In "The Avatar Returns" Iroh says "Good news for the Firelord. The Fire Nation's greatest threat is just a little kid" ("The Avatar Returns") while Zuko aptly points out all the damage that 'kid' did to their ship. Iroh is constantly shown enjoying tea, eating, buying unnecessary things, and indulging in whatever whim he feels like in the hopes it will get Zuko to loosen up. If Zuko loosens up, Iroh can teach him the true ways of firebending as well as recreate Zuko into a non-imperialistic, non-conqueror, and non-oppressor Firelord. Also, placing Iroh with Zuko from the first episode puts the association of Iroh's good nature and care for Zuko into the viewer's mind. As the viewer sees Iroh subtly and slowly change Zuko, the viewer starts to care for Zuko as well. Iroh's fondness for Zuko provides hope to the viewer that Zuko is redeemable.

Iroh's indulgences have convinced Ozai, Azula, and Zhao that Iroh is a non-threat because they believe after the death of his son, Iroh was broken and lost the sharp, calculating attitude needed to be a part of the Fire Nation's military. Though, even before Lu Ten's death, Azula saw him as weak stating that "[Ozai] would make a much better Firelord than his royal tea-loving kookiness" ("Zuko Alone"). To the Fire Nation royalty and nobility, Iroh is everything one should not be. He is too open, too sentimental, and not cutthroat enough, which is why Ozai allowed Iroh to go with Zuko after he was banished.

What is important to note, though, is that Azulon, the namesake of Azula and Iroh and Ozai's father, refused to listen to Ozai's argument that he should be the next Firelord because Iroh's bloodline ended. If Azulon had survived whatever nefarious plot Ozai carried out, Iroh would have become the next Firelord. However, if he had, it is doubtful he would have ended the war or the hunt for the Avatar because he was content to search for the Avatar with Zuko presumably until they died. Zuko's quest to find the Avatar was impossible and made Zuko's ability to rejoin his family and claim his throne also impossible. But because the Avatar was found and Zuko's fate intertwined with Aang's, Iroh helped end the war and stopped any further colonization of the Fire Nation.

Another important aspect of Iroh's character is his ability to see past class, element, and nation. In "The Chase," Iroh befriends Toph who's run away from the group and tells her how similar she is to Zuko. While Toph does not know who he is or that his nephew is Zuko, the very same one hunting down Aang, his advice helps her. In "Bitter Work," Iroh explains how each of the elements and nations are interconnected with each other because he understands that being flexible and open makes one stronger and wiser instead of only following one ideology like most of the Fire Nation.

Iroh is such a well-loved character because he is well-rounded and developed.

Schumpeter writes that “Social intercourse within class barriers is promoted by the similarity of manners and habits of life, of things that are evaluated in a positive or negative sense, that arouse interest. In intercourse across class borders, differences on all these points repel and inhibit sympathy” (Schumpeter 108). While this argument is true of Azula, Zhao, and even Zuko in the beginning, Iroh looks past the barriers between elements and nations. He learns from each element and each nation. He is a failed oppressor, a powerful bender, a successful businessman, and a freer of oppression. He is a contradiction because he is not what he appears to be at any point. He is the owner of a popular tea place, the Dragon of the West, the General who failed to conquer Ba Sing Se, a grieving father, and mentor to the Prince of the Fire Nation. It is through his contradictions that he is able to obey, defy, and reform not only himself but Zuko and, in extension, the Fire Nation.

Two other characters that come from wealthy and influential backgrounds are Toph and Mai. They are both from wealthy families and were forced into a subservient role. Mai explains she had to be a silent, submissive daughter to protect her father’s political career (“The Beach”). The only thing the viewer learns from Toph’s family is that her parents hid her existence from the world. However, her parents, mostly her father, see her as helpless and weak because she is blind. Another similarity between Toph and Mai is that they both act in their own self-interest. Toph does not join Aang and his friends because she wants to save the world. Likewise, Mai does not join Azula and Ty Lee because she wants to help the Fire Nation win the war. They both join their respective groups because that group offers freedom from their families. However, throughout the series the viewer sees them change. Mai betrays Azula to protect Zuko

who is fighting the Fire Nation with Aang and the rest of the protagonists. Toph stops being selfish and genuinely cares about her friends and in turn defeating Firelord Ozai.

While the viewer is told Mai's family's role in the war as Fire Nation nobility, we are not given that same information about Toph's. *Avatar* simply tells the viewer, through two schoolboys who are being threatened by Katara, that the Beifong's are "the richest people in town, probably the entire world" ("The Blind Bandit"). Toph brings out her family's power twice in the series. The first is at a party while the protagonists were in Ba Sing Se searching for Appa. Toph uses her family's seal as proof of the invitation to the party. Surprisingly, the bouncer does not let her and Katara through. As they step out of the line, Katara explains to a gentleman coming in that her blind cousin (Toph) lost their invitation ("City of Walls and Secrets"). It is later revealed that the gentleman who escorts them inside and refuses to leave them is Long Feng, the leader of the Dai Li. This is the first and only time that Toph's family's seal does not give them access to what they want. Despite the Beifong's power and wealth, even they are not above the Dai Li. This also could provide the reason Toph's parents chose to keep her a secret from the world. If the Dai Li knew they had a blind daughter, they would have leverage over the Beifong's. Being a powerful family, one can only assume she was hidden in part because her blindness is an obvious weakness, a vulnerability to her family and herself. Her perceived weakness is something she has weaponized for her own use. When she wants Aang, Sokka, and Katara to leave, she calls for help which draws two guards to her immediately. Toph is disabled and is traumatized by her parents. Yet, she has learned how to see with earthbending and uses others' perceptions of her as weak to manipulate them. What is amusing, though, is that Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee conquer Ba Sing Se by taking over the Dai Li where they meet Toph as a powerful earthbender.

The audience does not receive any information on how the Beifong's have retained their status during the war nor how they came to be so wealthy. However, the war was started a hundred years ago. While the Fire Nation had failed to conquer Ba Sing Se, they were able to create colonies in the Earth Kingdom. Later in the series, it is revealed that Mai's father was given control over Ba Sing Se. So, how are the Beifong's wealthy? This is an important question to pose because the show portrays the class inequality in Ba Sing Se through the lower, middle, and upper rings. The Beifong's do not live in Ba Sing Se, but as the capital of the Earth Kingdom, it is probable that it is the model for the rest of the cities in the Earth Kingdom.

What is interesting though, is that if the Beifong's are collaborators to the Fire Nation, why did they not turn Aang over to Firelord Ozai? It is common knowledge that Aang is wanted by the Fire Nation. Yet, Toph's father does not try and capture him. In fact, the only stance he takes is to let Aang be given to Ozai. It is through Toph's father that the audience discovers where Toph's worldview comes from. Her father does not see it as his problem to free Aang even if it means the complete takeover of the Earth Kingdom. All he cares about is keeping Toph safe by believing that she is too weak to defend herself, let alone another child. While Katara and Sokka try to appeal to Toph through the grandiose idea of saving the world, Toph does not help Aang until her father calls her weak and defenseless. Toph ultimately joins the group out of rebellion against her parents. But as her character develops, specifically after she cannot stop Appa's kidnapping, she stays because she cares for her friends, and they repeatedly prove to her that they care about her.

Aang tries to convince Toph to become his earthbending teacher, he and his friends fail. Her parents have sheltered Toph for the most part from the outside world. The only experience she has outside of the Beifong estate is the earthbending wrestling arena where she goes to fight.

She has little to no knowledge of the outside world and the war. When Aang initially asks Toph to be his teacher, she says in response “Not my problem” (“The Blind Bandit”). Because she has her family’s reputation and wealth, she doesn’t have to worry about what happens or how the war ends. She and her family aren’t directly affected by it like Katara, Sokka, Zuko, and Azula. Her only incentive to help Aang and his friends is to get away from her overprotective parents.

However, the opposite is true for Azula, Zuko, and their friends. They are directly affected by the war and how it progresses and ends. Azula is especially invested in the war. It is her chance to prove how useful and brilliant she is to Ozai. Ozai rewards her by trusting her with increasingly important tasks like capturing Zuko and Iroh and then conquering Ba Sing Se. This all leads to her becoming the Firelord. In Zuko’s flashbacks in “Zuko Alone” the audience is shown how Azula, even at a young age, knew how to manipulate her family and friends. She relentlessly bullied Zuko, was called a “true prodigy” (“Zuko Alone”) by her grandfather, and ridiculed Zuko as well as Ty Lee for learning non-bending skills. Azula is allowed to act this way because Ozai knew she was stronger than Zuko.

In “The Beach” it is revealed how each of the antagonists, despite being from a wealthy and influential family, were traumatized by it. Toph was also traumatized by how her parents treated her. Because of their families’ status, each of them (Mai, Ty Lee, Azula, and Zuko) have great influence in the war progresses. Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee are a nearly impossible team that, if they had remained together, could’ve won the war for the Fire Nation.

The cause of each of their suffering stems from the Fire Nation’s belief that they are the superior element. Liddell writes, “The superiority of the Fire Nation military is assumed from the opening of the show; we know that they have successfully conquered a large portion of the Earth Kingdom, wiped out the Air Nomads, and much of the Southern Water Tribe” (Liddell 24). Their

military conquering is what has led this group of Fire Nation royalty and nobility to become dangerously competitive and unable to function in a normal society.

Mai goes through a similar development. For most of the show, Mai appears detached and uncaring about everything-herself, her friends, her family, the war, etc. The only time she shows any signs of caring is when it concerns Zuko. This is proven when she betrays Azula to help Zuko despite Zuko breaking up with her. When Azula asks her why she did it she says, “I guess you just don’t know people as well as you think you do. You miscalculated. I love Zuko more than I fear you” (“The Boiling Rock: Part Two”). While Ty Lee is an obvious foil to Mai, her betrayal comes as a shock to both Mai and Azula.

Where Mai is realistic and blunt, Ty Lee is joyful and supportive. Ty Lee is able to better manipulate how people see her than both Azula and Mai. She is treated as a well-meaning, dumb, but a skilled nonbender. She makes herself a non-threat because that is her best chance to survive whatever Azula puts her through. And that is why Mai nor Azula saw her betrayal coming. Ty Lee appears to be a loyal friend to Azula, like Mai, but she is aware that Azula is jealous of her ability to socialize and make friends wherever she goes (“The Beach”). She treads carefully and always ensures that Azula feels superior to her. If Ty Lee hadn’t intervened, Azula would’ve struck Mai with lightning. She was going through the movements of lightning bending as Ty Lee blocked her chi and stopped her. Lightning bending is a deadly form of fire bending and it is what Azula used earlier in the show to kill Aang (before Katara’s spirit water revived him). Mai and Ty Lee’s betrayals are the climax of their character developments. They both chose a form of love over Azula’s control via fear.

Mai has been controlled all her life and initially joined Azula to be free of it. Like Toph, Mai’s family also put her in a subservient role, “I was a rich only child who got anything I

wanted...as long as I behaved and sat still, and didn't speak unless spoken to. My mother said I had to keep out of trouble. We had my dad's political career to think about" ("The Beach").

However, Azula is even more controlling than her family. Azula responds "Well, that's it, then. You have a controlling mother who had certain expectations, and if you strayed from them, you were shut down. That's why you're afraid to care about anything, and why you can't express yourself" ("The Beach"). Ironically, one of the few times Mai expresses herself is when she betrays Azula in that same season. While Azula was fully prepared to shoot her down for it, Ty Lee supported Mai.

While the audience sees how Toph interacts with her family and without them, we never see Mai with her family. Though, we do see her family with their new son, Mai's little brother, as they take over Ba Sing Se. Mai doesn't feel obligated to help the Fire Nation, to connect with her family, or to care for anything but her own survival. But what changes? It is the recognition she gets from Azula and Zuko about her life not being as easy as it appears. The recognition that she is traumatized by being treated as a porcelain doll-like Toph. To only be looked at and dressed up but never interacted with or treated with love and care. The seed of Mai's betrayal lies in that conversation at the beach. It is when Mai realizes not only that her friends know how her family treats her but by having this conversation with them, she can trust them and trust them to listen to her. It is key in that moment that it is Zuko who validates her feelings and connects with her about how hard their lives are.

Both Toph and Mai are introduced as selfish and self-serving characters. It is due in part because they are both from wealthy families who forced them into a subservient role. They both joined their respective sides because it offered an escape from that role. For Toph, it was a rebellion against her parents, against the image of a helpless blind girl. For Mai, Azula offered an

escape from her family life. Toph grows out of her selfishness as she spends time with her group because she is forced to think about others and forced to trust them. This is started by her inability to save Appa. On the other hand, Mai grows distant from Azula because she learns to trust Zuko and Ty Lee. While she still does not care about most things like helping the Fire Nation win the war, she cares about Zuko who does care about ending the war. She helps Zuko escape because she loves him-not because she wants to see the Fire Nation lose.

It is important to discuss how having powerful and influential people on both sides influences how the Fire Nation loses the war because it is true in the real world as well. In order to destroy companies like Amazon and the collection of data from social media websites, protestors need the support of people such as Abigail Disney, Mackenzie Scott, Mara Wilson, Mark Ruffalo, and Elliot Page. Without someone that understands the inside workings of the entrainment industry and how to approach government officials, it is harder to enact change. People are needed who are able to open doors that would otherwise remain shut.

CHAPTER 3: THE TRAUMA CYCLE-AANG AND ZUKO

Aang is undoubtedly the hero of *Avatar*. Aang, despite being the main character of the show, is often ignored as a survivor of genocide. After being frozen for a hundred years, he discovers that the rest of the Airbenders and their bison were killed by the Fire Nation. He and Appa are the last of their kind. Because of the totality of Aang's loss it is difficult to truly comprehend. As the audience, we only see glimpses of Aang's life before he was frozen. This is true for the other characters as well. When Aang is brought to the Southern Water Tribe village, Kanna, Katara and Sokka's grandmother, says "Well, no one has seen an airbender in a hundred years. We thought they were extinct, until my granddaughter and grandson found you" ("The Boy in the Iceberg"). Aang, at first, does not understand that he truly is the last airbender until he visits his childhood home and discovers his mentor's skeleton surrounded by Fire Nation helmets and armor. This leads to Aang feeling despair as he realizes that he is the last airbender and that his people are gone.

Aang was already overwhelmed when he was told he was the Avatar. He was told when he was twelve instead of sixteen which led to his friendships with the other Air Nomad children evaporate as he was excluded due to being the Avatar. Gyatso, his mentor, was the only one he could express himself with. Gyatso acted more childish and allowed Aang to have fun in a similar fashion to Iroh attempting to help Zuko be a normal teenager.

One of the major conflicts Aang faces is how to end the war without killing Firelord Ozai. The Air Nomads were a peaceful non-violent people and Aang tries to stick to those ideals. However, no one seems to understand why he cannot kill Ozai. Eventually, Aang wonders off and is able to connect to his past lives. This includes Avatar Roku, Kyoshi, Kuruk, and Yangchen. Roku tells Aang to be decisive ("Sozin's Comet"). Kyoshi tells Aang that "Only

justice will bring peace” (“Sozin’s Comet”). Kuruk says: “Aang, you must actively shape your own destiny and the destiny of the world” (“Sozin’s Comet”). Aang does not find a way to end the war without going against his pacifist beliefs. However, he calls upon Avatar Yangchen, an Air Nomad Avatar. He is hopeful that she will understand why he cannot kill Ozai but she tells him: “Selfless duty calls you to sacrifice your own spiritual needs and do whatever it takes to protect the world” (“Sozin’s Comet”). Aang is understandably upset about a fellow Air Nomad advocating that he use violence to defeat Ozai. However, he learns from a lion turtle, the beings that gave humans the ability to bend, how to take away someone’s bending. And it is with that knowledge that Aang defeats Ozai without killing him and ends the hundred year’s war.

Of course, Aang would not be able to end the war without help from his friends such as Zuko. As noted in Chapter One, Zuko bears a large facial scar on the left-side of his face. In “The Day of Black Sun: Part 2” Zuko confronts his father about how he was abused by him: ““You my father, who banished me just for talking out of turn. My father, who challenged me, a thirteen-year-old boy, to an Agni Kai”” (“The Day of Black Sun: Part 2”).

““It was to teach you respect”” (“The Day of Black Sun: Part 2”).

““It was cruel and it was wrong”” (“The Day of Black Sun: Part 2”).

““Then you’ve learned nothing”” (“The Day of Black Sun: Part 2”).

““No, I’ve learned everything. And I’ve had to learn it on my own”” (“The Day of Black Sun: Part 2”).

Ozai fed Zuko lies in order to make him the perfect soldier for the Fire Nation. He is the one who made Zuko think that if he caught the Avatar, who had not been seen in a hundred years, he would be welcomed back to his family and the Fire Nation with his honor restored. While Iroh has spent many episodes trying to convince Zuko that only he can restore his own honor. At the time

Zuko confronted his father, Iroh was imprisoned as a traitor to the Fire Nation. While Zuko did visit him and attempt to talk to him, Iroh refused to speak to him. This a scene from one of Zuko's visits:



Fig. 9 Iroh imprisoned (Avatar)

The way that this scene is framed makes it so that Zuko is actually the one trapped in a cage. Zuko is not happy being the crown prince. It is what he thought he wanted but it is a gilded cage. Another important thing to note is that the physical distance between Zuko and Iroh represents their emotional distance as well. Normally, they are well-within each other's grasp. However, because Zuko chose to betray Iroh and become his father and sister's puppet once again. Zuko pleads with Iroh, brings him food, yells at him all in an attempt to get Iroh to talk to him. However, Iroh refuses except to remind him that he has a maternal great-grandfather as well which guides him to the realization that Avatar Roku was his great-grandfather as well as Azulon.

Before Iroh is imprisoned, he teaches Zuko about lightning bending. Azula mainly uses it throughout the series and Zuko believes if he can master it he will be able to defeat her.

However, in order to achieve it, the chi in his body has to be completely balanced and he cannot have any conflicting emotions. Zuko is unable to master it. However, Iroh teaches him how to deflect the lightning. What is poetic about this is that redirecting the lightning can be seen as Zuko redirecting his family's abuse. Both Ozai and Azula have shot this at him and he was able to redirect Ozai's lightning. However, he had to absorb Azula's because he did not have time to do a complete redirect of the lightning as Azula switched at the last second from targeting him to targeting Katara. Zuko absorbed his family's abuse and while it left him scarred, no one else was hurt by them.

Aang is often paralleled with Zuko, the main antagonist of the show until the last season. "The Guru" and "The Avatar and the Firelord" further shows how the two are foils of each other. In "The Guru" Aang spends his time learning from Guru Pathik. Pathik explains to Aang the different chakras, where they are, and how to unblock them. The most poignant chakra is the light chakra. Pathik says, "The greatest illusion in this world is the illusion of separation. Things you think are separate and different are actually one and the same" ("The Guru/Crossroads of Destiny"). Aang realizes that the Four Nations are not actually four separate nations and therefore the four elements are not divided but connected to each other. This lesson comes to the forefront in "The Avatar and the Firelord" as Aang discovers his connection to Zuko.

While Aang and Pathik discuss the various chakras, Zuko awakens from his fever which he developed after choosing to help Aang by freeing Appa. Because this action goes against Zuko's quest, to find and capture the Avatar, which is tied to his identity and sense of belonging, Zuko has a physical reaction from going directly against it. Zuko has changed from the angry and narrow-minded exiled Prince to a mild-mannered and caring nephew.

Both Aang and Zuko go through a transformation in this episode. Aang nearly becomes a fully realized Avatar while Zuko becomes open-minded to his surroundings and his uncle's way of life. However, both quickly regress. Aang refuses to give up his love for Katara to bond with his avatar state and blocks the chakra which stops him from being able to activate it. Zuko betrays his uncle by joining Azula in fighting Aang and Katara. Though, Aang ultimately was able to give up Katara and unblock the chakra, Zuko stays with Azula and Ozai as they welcome him back as the rightful Prince of the Fire Nation.

In "The Avatar and the Firelord" Aang follows Roku's spirit as they watch Roku's life unfold. Again, while Aang learns about his former life, Zuko learns about himself. This episode is aptly named because it refers to both Roku and Sozin and Aang and Zuko. This episode irreversibly ties Aang and Zuko together because it reveals that Roku is Zuko's maternal great-grandfather. Pathik's lesson about the illusion of separation is important to note here. Aang and Zuko saw themselves as oppressor and victim, colonizer and colonized. The revelation that they have a spiritual bond changes their dynamic from that of an oppressor and victim to victims of their heritage: "Aang must save the world and Zuko must restore his honor. Thus, the audience is encouraged to look for similarities in how they handle their circumstances, even if this encounter fails to generate lasting sympathy" (Wood 178). They both feel the guilt and shame of those who forced the world to change so drastically and in doing so altered both of their destinies.

At the end of the episode Aang says "Roku was just as much Fire Nation as Sozin was right? If anything, their story proves anyone's capable of great good and great evil. Everyone, even the Firelord and the Fire Nation have to be treated like they're worth giving a chance. And I also think it was about friendships" ("The Avatar and the Firelord"). Aang is able to see how the

Fire Nation is not inherently evil like Toph suggests but that everyone has the capability of being either good or evil. This is mirrored in this quote by Iroh:

Because understanding the struggle between your two great-grandfathers can help you better understand the battle within yourself. Evil and good are always at war inside you, Zuko. It is your nature, your legacy. But, there is a bright side. What happened generations ago can be resolved now, by you. Because of your legacy, you alone can cleanse the sins of our family and the Fire Nation. Born in you, along with all the strife, is the power to restore balance to the world” (“The Avatar and the Firelord”).

Zuko has to choose to be good by giving up his notion of honor and belonging just as Aang has to choose to let his grief for his people, his fear of Ozai, and his love for Katara go in order to be the avatar.

CHAPTER 3: THE TRAUMA CYCLE-KATARA AND JET

In “The Puppetmaster” the main protagonists meet Hama. She is an old woman who runs the inn in the town they’re visiting. It is soon revealed that Hama is a waterbender from the same tribe as Katara and Sokka. This leads to Katara studying Hama’s advanced waterbending techniques, such as pulling the water out of flowers and trees. The next night under a full moon, Hama explains how she escaped from a Fire Nation prison by bloodbending. She tries to convince Katara that it is a necessary form of waterbending because they (waterbenders) need to be able to protect themselves from the Fire Nation who tried to wipe them out and have caused a tremendous amount of pain and loss to the Southern Water Tribe. While Katara and Hama are having this discussion, Aang, Sokka, and Toph discover that Hama has been bloodbending the Fire Nation residents and imprisoning them in a cave under the nearby mountain. Hama only created bloodbending as a way to free herself from the Fire Nation and then used it as a way of forcing the Fire Nation to recognize the pain they inflicted on her and the rest of the waterbenders. Hama’s trauma is a direct result of the Fire Nation imperialism. The Fire Nation conducted raids and kidnapped all the waterbenders until there were none left to defend the southern tribe. Without the Fire Nation raids, Hama would not have felt such hatred and desperation to protect herself and her culture. While Katara is able to sympathize with Hama’s struggle against the Fire Nation as she herself lost her mother to them, she knows that killing innocent Fire Nation villagers is not going to erase any of the pain or suffering they both have suffered.

What is important about this cycle of trauma is that Katara breaks it. She only uses bloodbending once after this, and it is against who she thought killed her mother. When she

finally does face her mother's killer, she does not use bloodbending or kill him. She sees a pathetic man instead of a vicious Fire Nation soldier and lets him go.

Jet also lost his parents and village as a child. He only appears in three episodes of *Avatar*. In the first episode, "Jet", he appears to be the leader of a resistance group, the Freedom Fighters, who protect innocent people from the Fire Nation. However, by the end of the episode Aang, Katara, and Sokka prove that Jet has lost sight of his once noble mission. Jet was willing to let a village flood and kill the residents who lived there in order to get rid of the Fire Nation troops that had taken over the village. In the third episode, "Lake Laogai", it is revealed that Jet was brainwashed by the Dai Li which causes him to fight Aang as they cornered Long Feng.

In "Jet" the audience learns that each member of the Freedom Fighters has suffered from the invasion of the Fire Nation. Jet himself lost his parents in a raid at eight years old ("Jet"). It is because of his loss that he formed the Freedom Fighters, a group of children and teenagers to fight the Fire Nation. Pipsqueak, a Freedom Fighter, says, "We've been ambushin' their troops, cutting off their supply lines, and doing anything we can to mess with 'em" ("Jet"). However, this extends to innocent people. The Freedom Fighters harass an old man travelling through the forest simply because he is a Fire Nation citizen. Sokka is the only one who sees that Jet no longer is protecting the innocent but instead is harming anyone associated with the Fire Nation. Later in Book Three, Hama, an ex-prisoner of the Fire Nation, takes revenge on the Fire Nation by torturing innocent people. Both Jet and Hama are examples of being a survivor of trauma only to traumatize others. This cycle of trauma and re-traumatization is a key to the balance of the show. It proves how much of a grey area there is when it comes to good and evil. In *Avatar*, two of the main characters, Iroh and Zuko, are both royalty of the Fire Nation, and are traumatized by

the Fire Nation and their own actions. Yet, they are also powerful allies to Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Toph.

This greyness surrounding trauma survivors continues in “Lake Laogai.” Jet becomes traumatized by the Dai Li through their brainwashing. The Dai Li control the Earth Kingdom and traumatizes their citizens like Joo Dee and the Earth King. The Earth King, especially, was not able to effectively rule upon hearing about the Fire Nation’s hundred-year war. He grows concerned about the Earth Kingdom, his people and how close they had come to being invaded.

Lake Laogai itself is the headquarters of the Dai Li and was directly underneath the lake. The Dai Li blow it up after Aang and his friends escape from them. Jet was killed by Long Feng after Aang was able to break through the Dai Li’s brainwashing. They forced him to forget that he was arrested for fighting Zuko at a tea shop. He was forced to forget that he moved to the Earth Kingdom with two of his Freedom Fighters. He was used as bait for Aang. With the Avatar in Ba Sing Se, the citizens were exposed to information, like the Fire Nation invasion, that the Dai Li were keeping from them. In addition, by trapping Aang in their headquarters, Long Feng could force him to leave the city in exchange for Appa (“Lake Laogai”).

Despite Katara’s constant threats against him, Katara and the rest of the main characters all regret not being able to save him. Balaev writes that “The traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies” (Balaev 155). Jet had to die because it was not only a shock to the audience and the characters, but because his death brings an end to the trauma cycle. Jet can no longer hurt anyone else due to his own grief and anger. However, his death forces the others to come face to face with their own mortality and serves as a reminder of the danger that follows them.

CONCLUSION

Avatar: The Last Airbender provides children with knowledge on how to recognize and resist imperialism. It does this by showing them several examples of the protagonists learning how to fight against the Fire Nation. However, the most important lesson *Avatar* teaches is that imperialism and its effects such as environmental devastation can be fought against with the help of others. As we live in a globalized world, there are people everywhere that advocate for various causes and gain support through social media like Twitter and YouTube. Some even receive financial support through websites like GoFundMe. In our world, support for a small pollution-ridden village like the one in “The Painted Lady” is the same as the situation in Flint, Michigan where they are still fighting for clean water. Or the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of North Dakota who are protesting the oil pipeline that runs through Lake Oahe, a lake they consider sacred and use for drinking water.

There is also a similar concern in how information is controlled and spread in the real world. The United States has several alt-right and “fake news” sources that caused a rise in white supremacy such as Kyle Hunt and Alex Jones whose influence leads to violent acts such as the 2015 Charleston shooting. However, that is nowhere near the end of it. PBS published a series called *Extremism in America*. It highlights mass murders linked to white supremacy. In part four, *Escalation*, Pete Simi, the author of *American Swastika*, states that “We’ve been unwilling to really grapple with our history. We have to understand where this problem has been in the past and what’s kept us from addressing it” (*Extremism in America*). This brings to mind Zuko and his original design as a skinhead. Zuko was proud of the Fire Nation and believed its propaganda. He nearly killed a group of teenagers several times throughout the series in the name of his country. Zuko was able to redeem himself. However, it is incredibly difficult for

members of the alt right to change their stance and worldview due to how fast alternative facts spread on platforms like YouTube and Fox News.

Another similarity *Avatar* has to the real world is the Fire Nation national history book. It is an equivalent to the heavily edited history textbooks used in public schools. Ray Raphael, Howard Zinn, and James Loewen have all written history books which provide an in-depth and factual analysis of the history of the United States. Loewen republished his book with a new introduction titled *Lies My Teacher Told Me in the Age of Alternative Facts*. He states “The problems we have pointed to with the media, elected officials, websites, and academics all make it particularly hard to be thoughtful about society today. Consequently, the education Americans get in K–12 history, civics, and social studies classes is more important now than ever” (Strauss). With most people uninterested in U.S. history, it becomes increasingly easy to believe conspiracy theories, white supremacy, and alt right alternative facts-just like there is no war in Ba Sing Se.

Avatar is not only one of Nickelodeon’s most popular shows, it also teaches very real and useful lessons to their audience of children. It teaches them to fight back with the tools they have (social media platforms). It teaches them to question unjust authority figures like Zhao. It teaches them to stand up for themselves. And most importantly, it teaches them to think critically about the information that surrounds them. They see how the citizens of Ba Sing Se are coerced into silence, how Aang is ignored, how the war allegedly does not exist all because the Dai Li refuse to acknowledge it. Of course, as children they are watching it because it is entertaining. However, those children will grow up and remember the plot lines and story arcs and they will see a mirror held against their world. They will see the same issues-the corrupt government, the

environmental devastation, the propaganda that creates white supremacists-and they will be able to understand and hopefully work against it like their favorite *Avatar* characters.

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