

KAM WOMEN ARTISANS OF CHINA

KAM WOMEN ARTISANS OF CHINA:
DAWN OF THE BUTTERFLIES

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Kam Women Artisans of China: Dawn of the Butterflies

By Marie Anna Lee

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To Nicola, Daniel, Thomas, Alena, and Ivan with love.

This book is a testament to the wisdom, humility, and ingenuity of these astonishing women: Wu Meitz (*1930), Wu Gaitian (*1932), Wu Yingniang (*1941), Wu Huazhuan (*1941), and Wu Mnci (*1950). These women showed me, a stranger, the wealth of knowledge traditionally reserved only for their daughters.

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PREFACE: ARRIVAL

“He can drive blindfolded here,” I try to assure my companions who are hopelessly trying to hold on to the seats in front of them. A young man that works for the Dimen Dong Eco Museum picked us up at the Liping airport this afternoon and is driving us to Dimen, a Kam minority village that will be our home for the next month.

The old van flies from side to side on the narrow winding road. Anastasya looks queasy. Zhang Zhanxian seems to take pleasure passing slower traffic in blind curves honking wildly to let incoming cars know we’re there. I hope I’m right about his driving ability and we get to Dimen in one piece.

We finally leave the main road and get onto a narrow unpaved road wide enough for one vehicle to pass. Thick green vegetation opens from time to time and we glimpse at luscious green valleys nestled against mountain slopes. The view is breathtaking. After about twenty minutes of twists and turns, we pass through an elaborately carved and painted gate that marks the village entrance.

“Welcome to my fairytale, ladies.” I smile at Anastasya and Jennifer. The dusty road to Dimen seems to have transported us several centuries back in time. My companions are unceremoniously plastered to the van’s windows as we gather first glimpses of the village. Rows of two-storied, weathered wooden houses line the road. From time to time, we see a cautious head peep through a doorway to see whom the van is bringing.

An everyday tale is being told in front of us, undisturbed by our presence. We drive slowly because we have to share the road with pedestrians. Women are returning from faraway fields, balancing on thin poles heavy loads of firewood and vegetables for tonight’s dinner. Not minding the late afternoon heat, they stop to chat with friends. Old men are resting in small groups smoking pipes in the shadow near a grocery store. A butcher is selling a freshly slaughtered pig on the main square. Little children scream with delight when jumping into the river that winds through the village. At the very farthest edge of the village, the van comes to a slow stop. Beyond the wooden bridge lies the Dimen Dong Cultural Museum, our home for the next four weeks.

Women walking on the road.



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Broken Thread

Heritage that survived centuries about to be forgotten

Many centuries ago in southwestern China, Han majority settlers drove the Kam people, whom they called Dong, from the fertile plains to the inhospitable mountains of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. The Kam sprinkled the mountain slopes with terraces of rice paddies, built spacious homes with tall fir timber, and wove sounds of nature into their songs.

The villages' remote locations ensured isolation from the outside world and the "progress" of industrialization. They were self-sufficient in many ways, growing their food and producing by hand most of what they needed in terms of clothing, tools, and other implements. It was a hard life with famine, illness, and forces of nature taking their toll. They relied on each other for help and developed social values that stressed collective wellbeing above individual needs. Their centuries-unchanged lifestyle earned them a nickname: living fossils of Chinese civilization.

Dimen village, a home to the Kam minority, hides deep in fir woods about seven kilometers from the nearest road. When communications between the Kam of Dimen and the outside world opened in the 1980s and 1990s, they were ill-prepared. Their culture, never written, relied on the younger generation's willingness to learn from elders and conform to traditional gender roles. From mothers, daughters learned to tend to the household, livestock, and fields, and take care of their families. In contrast, sons plowed fields, made baskets, carved woodwork, and built homes with their fathers. All studied their history, traditions, and culture through stories and songs.

Although this system was well-suited for an agrarian society that had not evolved for centuries, it could not withstand the pressure of its young people seeking a more profitable living outside the village. Humble in their ways and wishing descendants an easier life, elders refrained from asking the young generation to learn traditional skills. Without written history and a continued craft tradition, their unique culture was suddenly endangered.

Dimen Dong Eco Museum in the foreground and Dimen village in the background.

1.2. Finding the Story's Thread

Preceding projects

In her 2008 National Geographic article “Village on the Edge of Time,” Amy Tan asked, “What is an unwritten Dong¹ song if there is no one left to remember it? How many other traditions of Dong life would soon be lost?”²

Help came from outside the village. It was a foreigner who first realized the value of Dimen’s heritage and started taking steps to preserve its culture. Lee Wai Kit, a Hong Kong scholar, publisher, and entrepreneur, founded the Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum in 2004 to serve as a base for researchers to come and participate in the study and preservation of the Kam indigenous culture. The village itself is a living, ever-evolving part of the museum.

Since then, the museum has helped incorporate Kam language and traditions into the local school curriculum. In conjunction with academic partners, it has documented local oral traditions and songs, architecture, various crafts, and agrarian practices. Its staff has trained hundreds of children in Kam songs. The museum’s 100 Dong Songs program received the U.S. National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award in the International Spotlight category in 2012.

In 2007, Lee Wai Kit approached my then workplace, the School of Creative Media at City University of Hong Kong, and asked our students to help document the cultural heritage of the village and its surroundings. This led to the Guizhou Ethnic Minorities: Preservation, Archive, Eco-Heritage Conservation Project. Dr. Louisa Wei, a seasoned documentary director and writer, joined me at overseeing the project that spanned December 2007 to the fall of 2009. We recorded Kam songs and performances, recorded agricultural practices, interviewed shamans, and visited artisans who demonstrated their skills. It was a good start, a good introduction to life in Dimen, and a step toward preserving Dimen’s heritage.

During my three visits to Dimen in those years, I noticed the documentaries featured the same elderly women, called *za* in the village. They never specialized in one trade, as would be common in Western traditions but were more than proficient in many trades. They were master weavers, dyers, seamstresses, shoemakers, embroiderers, papermakers, and much more. These women reminded me of old Renaissance masters who often excelled in many art disciplines. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, was a painter, sculptor, musician, scientist, mathematician, engineer, and inventor. I saw a sparkle of the same genius in the elderly women of Dimen.

1 Dong is the Chinese name for the Kam people.

2 Tan, Amy. 2008. “Village on the Edge of Time.” National Geographic 213 (5): 102. Retrieved 28 June, 2013. <<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/05/china/guizhou/amy-tan-text>>

Without formal education, the *za*³ carried their people's centuries of knowledge, stories, and songs in their hands and minds. Unlike famous and revered Renaissance men, the *za* were completely unaware of the wealth of their knowledge. The elderly women were a complex web of interwoven knowledge that linked directly to how Kam culture formed and has lasted for centuries.

As an artist, designer, and educator, I have studied art theory, history, and practice, and learned that it is not possible to understand one area without exploring the others. If separated from other disciplines, the practice lacked conceptual depth and historical background. Similarly, if one woman demonstrated one step in making an object but another showed the next one, an outsider lost precious context of how the process came together as well as how it fit with the rest of that woman's knowledge. After realizing this, I decided to study these women in their entirety to understand relationships among their environment, lifestyle, and their art. I also wanted to see how one art form influenced another and whether there were variations in technique from one woman to another.

3 Za is a Kam term of respect for elderly women.

Wu Gaitian hangs dyed fabric and rinses boiled mulberry bark to make paper with.



1.3. Tying the Knot Apprenticeship

Studying and later teaching visual arts and design, I observed that a person could not master an art technique purely from observation. She has to actually practice and produce artwork to gain even a basic understanding. The best model for me involved study with an accomplished master who could not only demonstrate the process but also correct technical deficiencies and troubleshoot when necessary. There were tricks to holding tools, bending fingers, folding fabric not apparent unless I tried the process.

While I watched women artisans of Dimen demonstrate the “juicy,” visually appealing but incomplete aspects of their trade during demonstrations for the Guizhou Ethnic Minorities Project documentaries, I longed to learn details behind their work. I suspected that what looked easy in their hands would become clumsy and unnatural in anyone else’s. I realized that I needed a hands-on approach and learn where to find the necessary materials, how to prepare them, and process them to create the sought-after object.

[Dr. Luisa Wei and School of Creative Media students documenting Wu Gaitian making paper.](#)



The Guizhou Ethnic Minorities Project, however, did not focus on applied arts alone, and our short five-day stays did not allow for intense inquiry necessary to undertake in-depth study of the women's arts. It became clear I had to come again for an extended time either by myself or with a small group of students to apprentice with the matriarchs. Besides interviews and observations, I would learn the women's trades, generate actual objects, and independently replicate the entire craft processes. By spending time with them, I hoped to connect the dots between their various skills to get a glimpse at the heritage they carried within.

In 2009, I took a faculty position at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, and immediately started taking steps to organize another mission to Dimen. Working on a much smaller scale than in Hong Kong, I did not have anyone to report to, and I could set my own objectives and pace.

After months of planning and preparation, I came to spend a month in Dimen apprenticesing with women artisans in the summer of 2010. I brought my multi-talented student, Anastasya Uskov. With an insatiably inquisitive mind and quick wit, she became my second set of eyes, double-checking all processes and helping to replicate crafts as faithfully as possible. Jennifer Little, my colleague who teaches photography at the University of the Pacific, also joined that trip.

Our goals became straightforward: identify several leaders among the women and do as they did; study everything related to the process of each craft from finding necessary plants and materials to learning how to maintain the finished product; independently replicate the work to ensure accuracy of observations; to see a person behind the trade as a repository of collective Kam knowledge with more to give than a step-by-step methodology of a craft; and last, to find connections between various art forms and identify how culture is formed Kam style.

We first approached three women whom I had known from previous trips. They, in turn, introduced us to lifelong friends who were as unique and talented. We shadowed five women, asked them many questions, and interviewed their families and friends. We followed them to remote fields and helped tend their rice paddies and vegetable gardens. Sometimes, we cooked meals with and for them. We even traveled to the nearby town of Liping where grandchildren-sitting duties took one of them. The women invited us to cotton spinning sessions with friends, to parties, festivals, and family gatherings, as well.

The women at first assumed we wanted to film them as other teams had in the past. They sat down to show us highlights of their craft. Imagine their surprise when I put down my camera and asked if I could try. A smile lingered on their lips when they humored my silly request. They were as patient as I was clumsy. They indulged my questions and patiently demonstrated



[Wu Meitz teaches Anastasya Uskov to make paper.](#)

techniques until I was confident I knew what I was doing. Anastasya recorded the process, and then, we switched places. This method repeated itself during our stay. We then went on replicating the entire process on our own to see whether we achieved the same results as the *za*. After some failures and more questions that needed answers, we managed.

At the end of our stay, we completed the papermaking process, learned to make flower belts on back-strap looms, embroider garments, and weave on a treadle-operated frame loom. We extracted concentrated indigo dye from plant leaves and prepared a dye bath when it was time to leave the village.

I returned for a second apprenticeship in the summer of 2011, this time for three weeks. Anastasya Uskov again accompanied me along with Joanne Kwan, another graphic design student at the University of the Pacific. My former colleague from City University of Hong Kong who led many field trips to Dimen in the past and a former news reporter with a passion for finding the truth, Dong Ran came along to interpret from English to Mandarin. She doubled as a videographer and her previous connections in Dimen proved very useful in making new acquaintances and getting things done.

Dong Ran and I worked with the Dimen women this time around since my two students had projects of their own to fulfill. We made a new indigo bath, and I learned to dye cloth in it and treat the fabric to make it stiff and black.



Wu Huazhuan and I mash paper bark into pulp.

I made a pleated skirt and sewed a complete woman's everyday attire with the za's help, consequently completing all tasks I planned for the project.

I came for a brief visit in 2014 to conduct screen printing workshops in the village using motifs I translated from embroidery I collected in Dimen. I used the technique as a teaching tool to introduce Kam children to their cultural heritage hidden in the motifs. I also worked with the adults to develop new products using the technique. We founded an artisan cooperative as a result. I learned to read Kam iconography of Kam weaving and embroidering and to make pointed cloth shoes.

Even though I lack experience and can never match the level of craftsmanship of these women masters, I can recreate many of their unique processes—from finding necessary ingredients in the mountains (or buying them in the store)—to producing a finished product. I know how to weave, dye cloth, pleat skirts, and sew clothes. I can create colorful flower belts and complex embroidery to decorate garments. And I know how to protect these precious artifacts in bundles of handmade paper I made myself. Even though I cannot speak Kam nor can I sing, I have taken the tales of Dimen's past, and I am passing them on to those who read this to learn from the Kam culture and traditions.

1.4. Weaving the Tale

Matriarchs' lessons, big and small

Throughout the book, the five *za* come to give lessons and then return to tending fields and other duties. Each visit reveals steps necessary in learning a specific craft process beginning with material acquisition and ending with a finished product. I have kept the accounts as alive as the original encounters. I have tried to let their voices ring through, true to their tone and gestures. As the elderly speak Kam or a mixture of Kam and Mandarin Chinese, all conversations went through two interpreters—from Kam to Mandarin Chinese and then to English, and vice versa—so what you read is through that filter.

Since I didn't want interviews to feel like interrogations, I often let interpreters ask the follow-up questions at their own pace so it became a meaningful conversation, while I listened without a clue to what they were saying. After a while, they summarized what they discussed, and I diligently recorded it. While the words might not be precisely the *za*'s, at all times, message and tone are.

While learning a craft, we also learned about the culture and morality embedded in their conversation. The women are the embodiment and keepers of their culture, and it reflects in all they do. Seemingly unrelated events bubbled through, revealing details of the Kam way of thinking and doing.

Although stories unfold in an exotic and rugged location, one feels right at home with the *za*. Their caring expressions of friendship and love are no different from those one knows from home. They scold—and spoil—grandchildren the same way so many grandmothers do. They like to gossip like everyone else.

Wu Gaitian has the spirit of a merchant, able to sell everything that no one needs and make the person feel good about it. Wu Huazhuan is as bossy as a general, driving everyone crazy because everything has to go her way. The oldest Wu Meitz can count to five and when she means a lot, she says five. Like spice, their diverse personalities flavors stories and give context to their art.

Their lives are unobstructed by modern clutter. They work from sunup to sundown but rarely complain. There's hardly a task beyond the women's reach. The *za* have little but lack nothing. They are grounded in happiness, not because they're unaware of circumstances, but because they're content with life as it is. We learned about social values, family relationships, childrearing and education, farming, cooking, and even environmental and social sustainability. Through stories, songs, and personal example, the *za* weave the centuries-old Kam culture in front of our eyes.



Ivy Zhang, Mandarin-Chinese interpreter, and Wu Zhangshi, Kam-Mandarin interpreter talk with Wu Mnci while Anastasya weaves on back-strap loom; Wu Mnci enjoys a simple breakfast with her family.



CHAPTER 2

PLACES AND FACES

2.1. The “Hidden” Kam

The Kam ethnic group

Known as Dong to the majority Han Chinese, the Kam speak their own language and have a distinct culture and traditions. One meaning of Kam is to hide or conceal¹, which reflects the group’s preferred mode of self-preservation: removing themselves into remote areas. Numbering two and half million, they inhabit eastern Guizhou, western Hunan, northern Guangxi, and small pockets are found in Tuyên Quang Province in northern Vietnam.¹

The Kam are predominantly rice farmers, known for growing glutinous rice, and eating spicy and sour food. They were always self-sufficient and did not trade with others on a large scale.² They use local China fir timber to build stilted wooden houses, drum towers and covered wind-and-rain bridges without any plans and do not use any nails in building the structures.

They are internationally renowned for polyphonic choir singing. Known as Kam Grand Song, UNESCO listed this style as a world-class intangible cultural heritage in 2009. Without a written form of their language, the Kam pass down their knowledge and culture orally, partly in songs. This singing tradition also permeates courtship and many daily activities.

In the past, Kam areas were fairly inaccessible with many county seats not having roads that led to them before 1949.³ There are various degrees of assimilation into the mainstream Chinese culture among various Kam groups. Those living in remote mountainous areas have often developed independently with little interaction with the outside world, while those in towns and fertile plains had plentiful contact with the Han and adopted some of their habits over time. In the 1990s, even the remote areas have seen major changes because the government invested in modernizing the countryside, and many of the people moved into urban areas to seek employment.

1 Norman D Geary et al., *The Kam People of China: Turning Nineteen?* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 3.

2 Geary, 22.

3 Geary, 22.

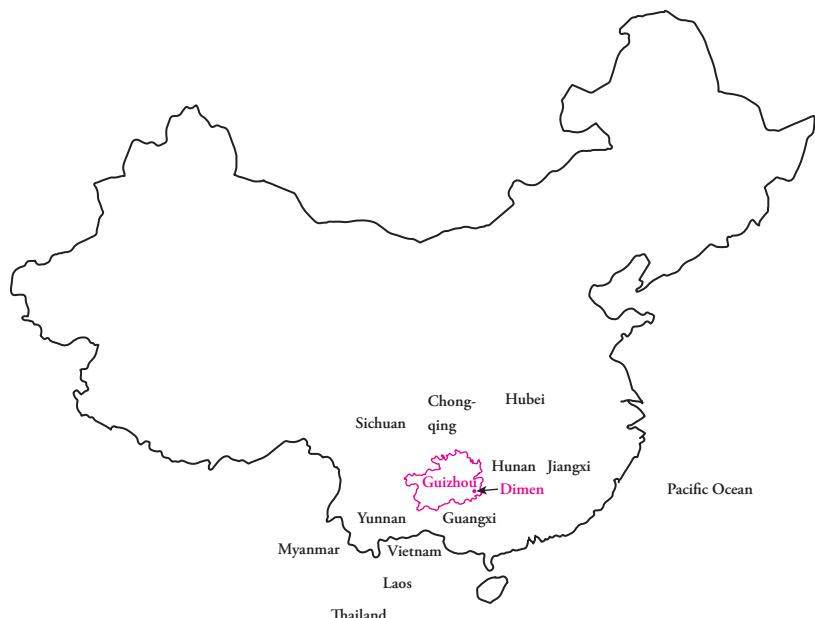


Fig. 2-1. Map of China.

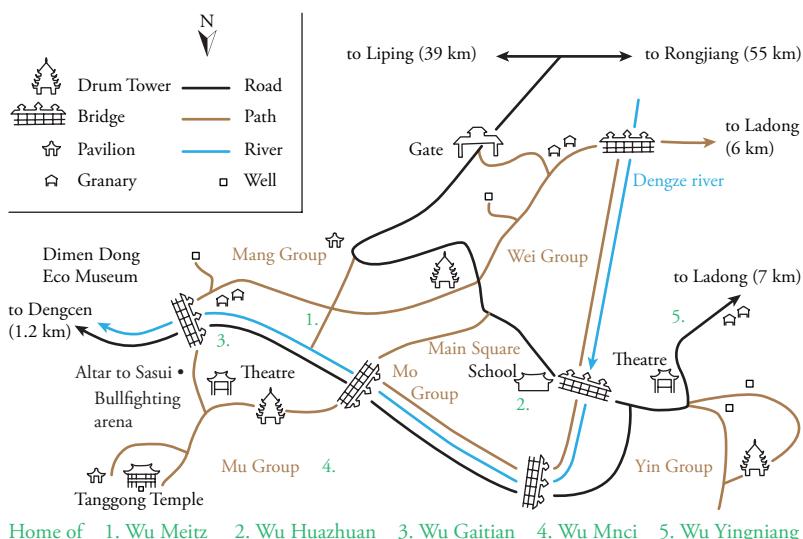


Fig. 2-2. Map of Dimen.

2.2. Dimen, the Kam Spring

Dimen highlights

Dimen is a three-hundred-year-old Kam minority village hidden deep in the fir-covered mountains of Guizhou, one of the poorest provinces in south-central China (see Figure 2-1.) One can now fly to the county seat of Liping, located in the southeastern tip of Guizhou, and then drive thirty-nine kilometers to Maogong and take a narrow four-kilometer-long unpaved road to the village.

Dimen is larger than average in Kam standards in which two to three hundred households often constitute a village. In Dimen, there are about twenty-one hundred people living in five hundred and twenty households. There used to be thirteen hundred households at one point, but many people migrated to surrounding areas and founded new villages. The name Dimen means spring so it takes on a new significance as a place of origin from which the other villages have sprung.

The village is divided into five quarters: Wei, Mo, Mang, Mu, and Yin (see Figure 2-2.) Mu is where the first settlers founded Dimen and where the cemetery is. People tend to marry outside of their quarter. There is only one surname used in the village, Wu. There are three families with a different last name; they are the Duang, the descendants of the landowner family and children of Wu Mnci, one of our mentors.

Woman walks back to Dimen from her fields. Dimen is visible on the right.



A carved entrance gate marks the village grounds high up on the main road from Maogong. Teenage girls in colorful costumes welcome village guests there with songs, decorated eggs, and rice wine. Below, Dimen rests in a lush green valley. River Dengze winds through the middle of the village with houses lining its high banks. As the river flows on from the village, a temple, an altar to a widespread Kam goddess Sasui,⁴ and a bull-fighting arena define Dimen's farthest edge. A cemetery demarks the original grounds of the village before it spread to the other riverbank. Rice fields lie farther down the stream.

The village girls lock elbows with the guests and lead them through the gate into the village below. After a few curves down the unpaved road, the main drum tower comes into view. overshadowing all other buildings in height and lavishly decorated with paintings and carvings, it's the heart of the community and a meeting place where village elders decide public matters and settle disputes. It was rebuilt in 2007 after a large fire that destroyed a significant portion of the village and the old drum tower.

Dimen has two more drum towers that serve as meeting places for their clans. Celebrations, funerals, feasts, and other gatherings happen underneath their painted beams. Old men often smoke and discuss politics there, while children play cards and peek out from its open balustrade.

⁴ Goddess Sasui is Kam female ancestor who is the village's main guardian of peace and prosperity. Geary, 155.

Young women welcome visitors to Dimen by its gate.



Passing the main drum tower on the right, a person can walk onto the main square that has a few concrete shops that are a familiar sight all over China. Other than the general stores that sell everything from incense to small farming equipment and beer, the square has a noodle shop and a small hostel to accommodate visitors. A few wooden stalls sell freshly butchered meat in the evenings.

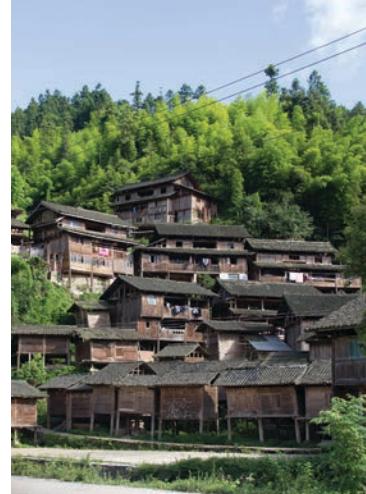
Beyond the square, an elementary school equips children with standard lessons first in Kam and later in Mandarin Chinese. It now serves children from the neighboring village of Dengcen, whose Kam-speaking school closed in 2008 forcing the children to walk more than one and half kilometers to school one way every day.

A luscious green rice field lies behind the school with a broad but shallow river curving around it from two sides. It supplies fish, irrigates plants, and serves for washing whatever needs to be cleaned whether it's a human body, a freshly butchered pig, or a kettle darkened by years of use. Two wind-and-rain bridges dominate the scene. A small one-room clinic that treats most ailments with IV fluids is located just before the first bridge. There's a small supply of medicine, as well, and the staff says they can set broken bones, if necessary.

The first wind-and-rain bridge is wide enough to allow a bus to pass underneath its carved beams. Look upstream, and there's another bridge, narrower but just as ornate as the first one. Just where the river bends downstream

[View of drum tower, main square and school; farmer plows field behind the school; woman washes pig head skin in the river by the wind-and-rain bridge.](#)





Houses around a pond; granaries and houses rising from the river to a hill.

is another bridge, as narrow as the second one. Two more bridges connect the two sides of the river before the river flows past the village. The bridges are covered with an roof and are lined with benches along its sides, providing a refuge from the elements to the passersby.

Carved animals and painted heroes welcome tired souls to take a rest from the outside elements for a while underneath the bridges' roofs. Deep shadows, a gentle breeze from the cool river waters, and the calming sound of water rippling downstream seduce many to take a nap on the benches that line the bridges in hot summer afternoons.

The road forks after the first bridge with one road leading to the village of Ladong and the other follows the river to Dengcen with rice fields beyond the village confines. A labyrinth of stone-laid lanes wide enough for a horse cart and narrow dirt pathways wide enough for one person to pass connects various parts of the village with the main road. Open sewers run parallel to the main paths. People wash clothes, equipment, and their bodies in their waters.

Two- to three-story houses huddle together in long rows with colorful laundry and leafy vegetables hanging down from their verandas. Empty wooden coffins, some painted black to be more beautiful, peek from underneath the raised houses. They are part of the Chinese tradition of preparing one's own funeral.

Penned animals infuse the air with an acrid aroma. A space opens up from time to time for a smaller square, a communal open workspace, a small garden, and even a rice field to form neighborhoods. Fishponds dot the village with red or green duckweed blanketing the surface. Vegetables sometimes grow on small docks floating in their midst. Five stone-carved wells, scattered on the outskirts of the village, provide fresh water to the inhabitants.

The village prides itself on its three outdoor theaters. The performances are often of local origin, many written by songmaster Wu Shengzhang, who is also a cousin of our teacher Wu Mnci. Indeed, Kam drama is said to orig-