



Dimen village, Guizhou province, China

# Kam Minority Heritage Project, Dimen Village, Guizhou, China

Pacific Graphic Design students Anastasya Uskov ('11) and Joanne Kwan ('13) under the leadership of Marie Lee (Visual Arts) were awarded 2013 SEED Honorable Mention for Excellence in Public Interest Design. Recognizing design projects with exceptional social, economic, and environmental impact, the SEED Awards represent the forces needed to create truly sustainable projects and positive change in the world.

[\(designcorps.org/awards/about/\)](http://designcorps.org/awards/about/)

## Design team

Marie Anna Lee, Visual Arts

Anastasya Uskov, BFA Graphic Design 2011

Joanne Kwan, BFA Graphic Design 2013

## Other Participants

Dimen village

Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum

Jennifer Little, Visual Arts

## Community of Dimen

Situated deep in the mountains of Guizhou province in China, Dimen village has been isolated for centuries from the rest of the world. It has resisted modernization for many decades. Dimen, inhabited by Kam minority people, has its unique customs, stories, songs and designs that differentiate it from other Kam villages as well as from the mainstream Chinese culture.

Recently, the outside world has come to Dimen full force and visible changes are happening every year. The unique traditions are suddenly on the brink of extinction since the elderly have not passed down their skills to the younger generation nor their knowledge was written down.



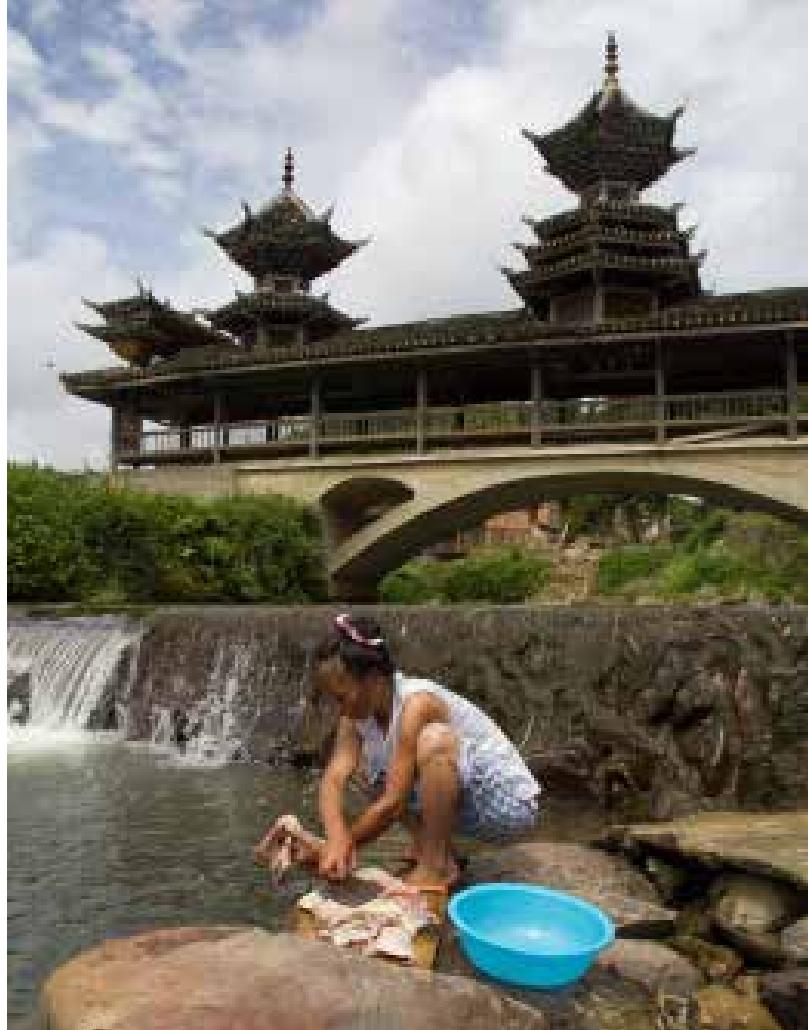
Wu Jie dyeing traditional skirt fabric while her husband is getting a haircut



Women winding cotton threads on spools



Man plowing his field



Woman cleaning pork skin in front of "wind and rain" bridge



Woman in traditional attire washing a meat cleaver



Left: Marie Lee dyeing fabric in indigo bath with Wu Mei Tz supervising  
Left below: Wu Mei Tz and Anastasya Uskov making paper



## Mission

Use design as a positive force in the lives of Dimen people. Listen, learn and observe. Do not assume. Preserve their heritage and boost their identity and self-worth, stimulate interest in their traditions and help them achieve better living conditions without having to leave the village.

## Team's solution

In collaboration with Dimen Dong Cultural Eco-Museum, a team of graphic design students from University of the Pacific led by Visual Arts professor Marie Lee has worked on preserving of Dimen's cultural heritage through design. Their project aims to build of the local identity and provides design solutions for their goods so that they can be sold beyond the village. Visual Arts professor Jennifer Little has also participated in the project through her photographs.

The project aims to move through four levels of cultural preservation of Dimen's heritage: The first one observes and records existing artistic expressions. In the second one, designers immerse into the culture's aesthetic values and way of thinking and then design within those values. The third one sees an active collaboration between the designer and locals. The fourth one empowers local artisans and designers to create their own designs.

The Kam Minority Heritage project in Dimen has encompassed the first three so far with its goal to teach design to the village youth based on local aesthetics in the next phase.

## Cultural Heritage and Local Identity

The team documented and replicated craft processes of Dimen women: paper making, weaving, indigo dyeing and embroidery. Local customs, stories and folklore were also collected.

A detailed record exists now of the unique techniques that can be built upon in the future by both researchers and the villagers alike. Design patterns specific to the village will be used by future teams in silk-screening workshops aimed at the local young people.

At the same time, the students connected with and interviewed the younger generation. Anastasya Uskov distributed disposable cameras to middle school children and who used them to document their daily lives. Joanne Kwan interviewed teenagers and young adults about their experience in the village and created a graphic novel featuring each person and highlighting the importance of one's heritage.





Rice packaging designed by Marie Lee

The future goal is to involve the younger generation in the local crafts through workshops where non-traditional techniques like silk screening are complemented by local designs and processes. The ultimate goal is to empower local artisans and designers to create their own designs and carry their local identity and cultural heritage into the digital age.

#### Sustainable Living

The local Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum decided to help the villagers make sustainable living in the village by working the fields or selling their products. They founded a cooperative where the farmers can grow organic produce and create local products. The museum will sell these in China and abroad. Marie Lee created a visual identity for Dimen and designed various packaging solutions to support the cooperative's efforts. The visuals are based on her interviews with locals and photographs of the villagers in their environment.

This project serves as an example for students of how graphic design can become a powerful tool in global activism and empowerment of disadvantaged groups in other cultures.

#### Expected Results

The documentary findings will be published in a book form in English with hopes of it being translated into Chinese. A short documentary film will accompany the book and movie segments will also be incorporated in the form of online supplements. The results and documentaries will be made available at the Museum to be accessed by researchers, visitors and the villagers. This way, part of Dimen's cultural heritage is preserved for the future and the crafts can be picked up by new generation of craftsmen.

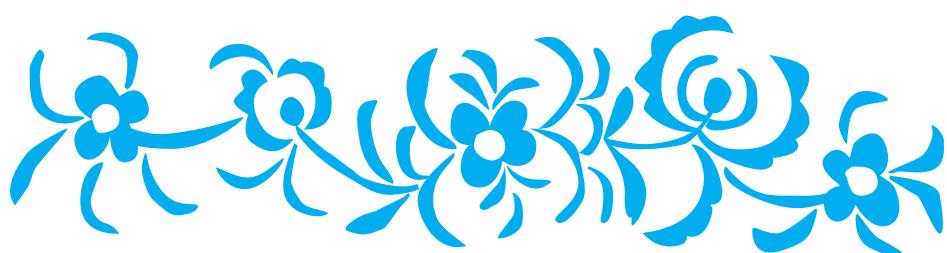
The patterns that were collected will be given to the village to be used for promotion of the local identity. Future workshops will introduce these patterns and stimulate interest in traditional techniques.

#### Thanks

The project has been supported by the Undergraduate Summer Research Fellowship, Rupley Church Grant for International Understanding, Eberhardt Research Grant and Scholarly/Artistic Activity Grant. Special thanks to Dr. Merrill Schleier (Visual Arts) for her advise and support.

#### Further work in Dimen

The Pacific Scholars under the leadership of Dr. Cynthia Wagner-Weick have started a program teaching English as a second language to schoolchildren in Dimen.



Design patterns based on cutout by Wu Meng Xi



Anastasya Uskov and Wu Zhi Mei photographing each other



Wu Xing Xia jumping in a snapshot photographed by one of her friends on Xia's disposable camera



Joanne Kwan and Anastasya Uskov on a hike above the village



Anastasya Uskov winding cotton thread on a spool



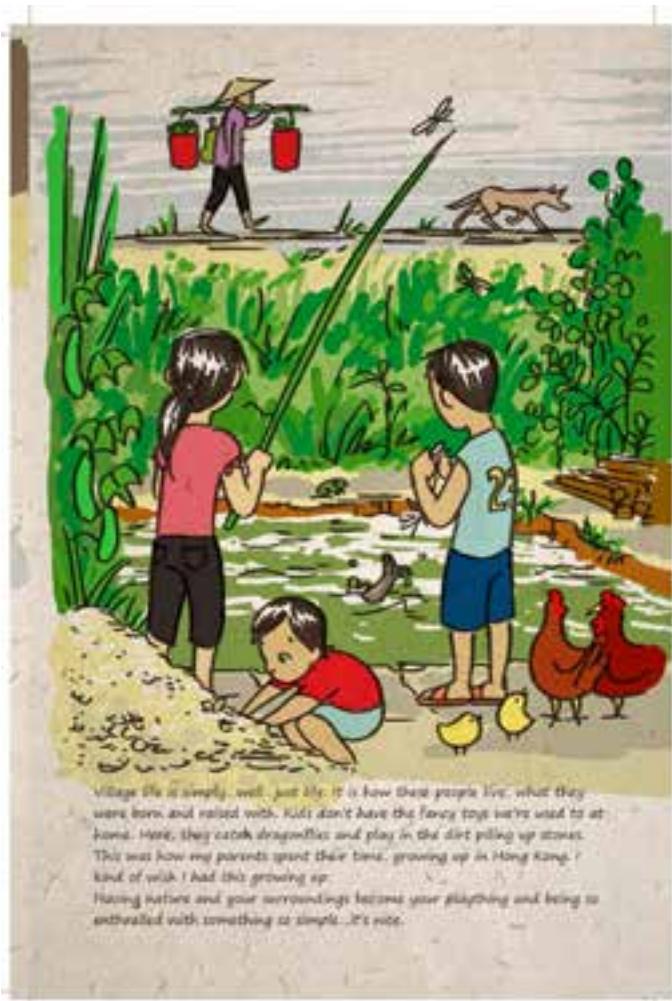
Marie Lee taking cloth out of indigo bath



Embroidery template cut by Wu Meng Xi



Wu Hua Zhuan and Marie Lee pleating a skirt



## Detailed Information on the Project

### List the demographic qualities of the community or audience served by this project.

Dimen belongs to Kam minority, one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. Chinese call them Dong. Dimen is about three hundred years old. The village has about 520 households and less than 2200 people. It was once home to 1300 households. Dimen has been virtually isolated for centuries from the rest of the world. Called "fossils of Chinese civilization," the Dimen Kam resisted modernization for many decades. Recently, the outside world has come to Dimen full force and visible changes are happening every year. Many people, especially the younger generation, left to work in distant factories to provide for their families leaving fewer working-age people in the village. Grandparents often take care of grandchildren while parents are away. The main occupation is farming and it is carried out much like in the past with little help of technology. The villagers grow rice and vegetables and raise animals such as chicken and pigs.

### List the historical and/or cultural characteristics of the community or audience served by this project.

Kam have a distinct culture and speak their own language, which is quite different from Chinese. They do not have any non-academic writing system. Their traditions and culture have been preserved through songs that are passed down from generation to generation. They are so famed for their singing that UNESCO designated the Kam (Dong) Grand song as an intangible cultural heritage in 2009. Kam are also famed for their carpentry skills and unique architecture. They have distinct crafts as well: weaving, dyeing cloth in indigo, embroidery, and paper making. A lot of these traditional methods are known only to a few elderly women. Unfortunately, these women did not pass down the skills the younger generations due to lack of interest. There is a real danger that parts of their history, cultural heritage and knowledge be lost in a few years.

### Issue Addressed: Cultural Heritage

### Design Response: Describe the design and how it is a response to the priority issue selected above.

Until recently, Dimen has successfully maintained its cultural identity and resisted centuries of Chinese domination thanks to its remote location. With improved communications the locals seem hungry for progress and everything that is non-local. Because of the depletion of the population and lack of interest, the elderly masters who carry much of the knowledge and history of the people have not passed their skills down to the subsequent generations. Without any written records, Dimen's unique heritage is suddenly at the brink of extinction as the bearers of traditional knowledge and skills pass away. Western media and conservation agencies have become aware of Dimen's plight. For example, National Geographic published a story on Dimen in 2008; and UNESCO designated the Dong (Kam) Grand song as an intangible cultural heritage in 2009. Given this attention, the Chinese government plans to further improve access to the area to bring in more tourists. Opposing this trend, Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum has been established to find ways to preserve the indigenous culture and its traditions and at the same time to increase the villagers' standard of living. In collaboration with the Museum, Marie Lee and a team of undergraduate graphic design students at the University of the Pacific documented the unique craft processes of elderly Dimen matriarchs: paper making, weaving, indigo dyeing and embroidery. The processes were then replicated from scratch to ascertain the correct methodology. Local customs, stories and folklore were also collected. A detailed record exists now of the unique techniques that can be built upon in the future by both researchers and the villagers alike.

### Methods:

- Interviewing
- Observations
- Descriptive writing or drawing
- Multimedia documentation
- Replication of craft processes

**Participation methods summary: Describe the ways in which community members, audiences, or stakeholders were/are involved in the design process**

In 2010, Marie Lee and Anastasya Uskov apprenticed with five elderly matriarchs for five weeks and Marie Lee continued the work for another three weeks in 2011. They interviewed the women about their lives, their beliefs and values to gain perspective to their knowledge. They recorded their craft processes through video, sound recordings, notes and drawings. A special emphasis has been given to hands-on learning as opposed to pure observation where key techniques can be easily missed. Lee and Uskov then replicated the process from scratch to make sure every detail was addressed. They clarified any inconsistencies before departure.

**Success method summary: How will the project's success be defined and results measured (especially relative to the issue you are addressing)?**

The findings will be published in a book form in English with hopes of it being translated into Chinese. A short documentary film will accompany the book and movie segments will also be incorporated in the form of online supplements. The results and documentaries will be made available at the Museum to be accessed by researchers, visitors and the villagers. This way, part of Dimen's cultural heritage is preserved for the future and the crafts can be picked up by new generation of craftsmen.

**Issue addressed: Local Identity**

**Design Response: Describe the design and how it is a response to the priority issue selected above.**

Each Kam village has its unique customs, stories, songs and designs that differentiate it from other places. The older generation can easily identify which village a person comes from by their attire, for example. This is not true for the younger generation who dresses in western fashion. There are only two elderly sisters who still know how to create patterns for these unique embroidery designs.

The team interviewed one of them and observed her technique. They also photographed embroideries and paper purses created by her and other artisans. At the same time, the students connected with and interviewed the younger generation. Anastasya Uskov distributed disposable cameras to middle school children and had them document their daily lives. Another student Joanne Kwan interviewed young people about their experience in the village and created a graphic novel featuring each person.

The future goal is to involve the younger generation in the local crafts through workshops where non-traditional techniques like silk screening are complemented by local designs and processes. The ultimate goal is to empower local artisans and designers to create their own designs and carry their local identity and cultural heritage into the digital age.

**Methods**

- Descriptive writing or drawing
- Multimedia documentation
- Observations
- Replication of craft processes
- Workshops

**Participation methods summary: Describe the ways in which community members, audiences, or stakeholders were/are involved in the design process**

The team interviewed and observed Wu Meng Xi making embroidery patterns. They photographed the embroideries she and other women in the village did to capture the breadth of the patterns. They also collected designs from other women. These patterns are in the process of being converted into vector drawings.

Anastasya Uskov asked twelve middle school children to document their lives using a disposable camera. The students were asked to write an essay about what they photographed. Most pictures featured their families and friends but a significant portion also captured their environment.

Joanne Kwan interviewed five young adults basing a graphic novel chapter on each of their lives.

**Success method summary: How will the project's success be defined and results measured (especially relative to the issue you are addressing)?**

The patterns that were collected will be given to the village to be used for promoting local identity. Future workshops will introduce these patterns and stimulate interest in traditional techniques. The villagers were surprised by our interest in the crafts and they can see value in the works now. The ever-present children also took note and tried the crafts techniques for the first time. The children and young adults the students worked with took time to identify what is important in their lives and in their environment, setting priorities and finding interest in everyday village life.

**Issue addressed: Living Wages**

**Design Response: Describe the design and how it is a response to the priority issue selected above.**

The average yearly wage in the village is US\$1000, well below average for even rural China. Therefore young and middle-aged people seek employment in faraway factories leaving their elderly parents to take care of family fields and children. When interviewing these migrant workers, it became clear they value their family the most and miss being around but need to do so to make a living. The local Eco-Museum decided to help them make sustainable living in the village by working the fields or selling their products. They founded a cooperative where the farmers can grow organic produce and create local products. The museum hopes to sell these in China and abroad. Marie Lee created a visual identity for Dimen and designed various packaging solutions to support the cooperative's efforts. She also proposed a website for the Museum. Besides providing resources on the village, the website will offer the local fare for sale. The visuals are based on her interviews with locals and photographs of the villagers in their environment. She hopes to eventually empower local artisans and designers to create their own designs and carry their cultural heritage into the digital age.

**Method**

Observation

Interviewing

Multimedia documentations

Collecting local design patterns

Feedback on designs in progress

Design instruction

**Participation methods summary: Describe the ways in which community members, audiences, or stakeholders were/are involved in the design process**

Marie Lee collaborated with the Museum and the locals to create a visual identity and other promotional materials that would reflect the Kam aesthetics. The Museum suggested themes to be used in the designs and provided vital feedback. She based her designs on her photographs of the villagers, Dimen's distinct architecture and local patterns that she collected. The color palette was inspired by the vibrant embroideries that mimic Dimen's fauna and flora. In the future, Lee hopes to introduce local artists to computer design and inspire them to create designs based on their own heritage, not on imported aesthetics.

**Success method summary: How will the project's success be defined and results measured (especially relative to the issue you are addressing)?**

There is strong demand within China to buy organic food. The Museum website and promotional materials will raise awareness about Dimen in China as well as abroad. By buying Dimen produce and products, outsiders will support existing production and stimulate growth. There will be an increase in eco tourism that can bring a significant income to the village if well regulated. These activities should allow a number of villagers to make sustainable living through agriculture, trade, crafts or tourism within the village without having to leave to work in factories. The Museum will track the number of villagers who join the cooperative and their income.