

Kam Cultural Heritage in Dimen village, Guizhou, China
by Marie Anna Lee

Kam Cultural Heritage in Dimen, China

Marie Anna Lee
University of the Pacific



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Talk Overview /

Starting a Community-Based Project

1. Identify a potential project
2. Research: Critical Community Issues
3. Feasibility assessment
4. Create an overall plan / set goals
5. Develop the project (SEED)
6. Implement / Maximize impact through partners

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Identify a potential project

1. Identify a potential project
 - Proactive
(Design21sdn.com, Sparked.com)
 - Passive approach
 - Approached by community / non-profit
 - Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum
2. Research: Critical Community Issues
3. Feasibility assessment
4. Create an overall plan
5. Develop the project (SEED)
6. Implement / Maximize impact through partners

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Identify a potential project

Project Precursor (2007–09)

- Guizhou Ethnic Minorities: Preservation, Archive, Eco-Heritage Conservation
 - Documentary Project by School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong
 - Document Kam traditions through video, sound and photographs
 - Emphasis on student learning (financed by Cityu Dean of Student Learning)
 - Product: short documentary videos, sound recordings and photography collection (unsorted)



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Identify a potential project

Kam Minority Heritage Project

- Dimen village, China
- Academic (faculty-student project)
 - BFA Graphic Design students and faculty
 - University of the Pacific
- Design as an agent of preservation and change
- Field trips
 - Summer 2010, five weeks
 - Summer 2011, three weeks



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Once Identified a potential project

Research Community and Identify Critical Issues

- Identify a potential project
- Research:
 - Community
 - Critical Community Issues

1. Feasibility assessment
4. Create an overall plan
5. Develop the project (SEED)
6. Implement / Maximize impact through partners



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Research / Community

Kam people 僮族

- Chinese call them Dong
- Population of 2.9 million
- Guizhou province, Hunan province, Guangxi province, and Hubei province
- Mild climate and an annual rainfall of 1,200 mm
- Farming




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Research / Community

Cultural Characteristics of Kam

- Distinct language and culture
- No writing system
- Oral traditions carried through songs



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Research / Community

Apart from songs, they are famous for

- Carpentry skills and unique architecture
 - Wind and Rain bridges
 - Drum towers
 - Building without using nails
 - No elaborate plans
- Distinct crafts
 - Indigo-dyed cloth
 - Weaving
 - Embroidery
 - Basketry
 - Papermaking



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Research / Community

Dimen Village

- Deep in mountains of remote Guizhou province (Southwestern China)
- 520 households
- Hub of 15 surrounding villages
- Isolated for centuries
- Resisted modernization and assimilation



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Research / Community

One steps back into time

- Subsistence economy with limited cash flow
- Use mostly hand tools, animals used for labor in the fields
- Harsh living conditions
 - Not uncommon that people starve through winter months



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Research / Community

Changes happening very fast

- Electricity
- Cell phones
- Satellite TV
- Household appliances
- Open sewage and water hydrants
- Transportation
- Tourism



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Research / Community

To make ends meet,

- Many young people leave to work in factories or study at universities
- They view the knowledge and skills of the past generations as of no use in the new world
- Young people who stay are often unemployed and look for a way out



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Research / Community

Because of lack of interest,

- Unique traditions / history / skills not passed down to younger generation
- Not written down
- In danger to become extinct as elderly masters die



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Research / Critical Issues

Areas of Need

- Living conditions
- Healthcare
- Education
- Cultural preservation



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Research / Critical Issues

What the Kam see...

- Harsh living conditions
- Lack of opportunities for young
- Education as a key for future
- Western clothing is more practical than Kam attire
- Traditional architecture catches on fire easily
- Easier to buy items than to make them



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Research / Critical Issues

What do Kam Value?

- Family important
 - Provide for family
 - Give children future
- Culture
 - Songs



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Research / Critical Issues

Problem Identifications

- Based on Kam views and values:
 - People cannot make ends meet using traditional methods
 - Unemployment / low wages
 - Future in education
- Based on observation and case studies in other locations
 - Dimen's culture may vanish
 - No written records



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When critical issues identified

Assess feasibility of the project

1. Identify a potential project
2. Research: Critical Community Issues
3. Feasibility assessment
 - Resources
 - Establish essential partnerships
 - Logistics / financing
4. Create an overall plan
5. Develop the project (SEED)
6. Implement / Maximize impact through partners



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Feasibility Assessment / Resources

My Assets

- Communication Design
- Photography
- Fine art and craft methodology
 - paper making, sewing, embroidery, weaving, cloth making, woodwork
- Non-western art history
- Journalism, sociology, archaeology
- Upbringing in communist regime
- Contacts in Hong Kong



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Feasibility Assessment / Resources

University of the Pacific Design Team

- Marie Anna Lee, Graphic Design Professor
- Anastasya Uskov, BFA Graphic Design '11
- Joanne Kwan, BFA Graphic Design '13



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Feasibility Assessment / Resources

Shortcomings

- Small-scale
- Funding by small grants that covers expenses
- Pro-bono
- So far all-women team
- Do not speak Mandarin / Kam / read Chinese
- Limited by distance / university schedule
- Short window before traditions get lost



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Feasibility Assessment / Partners

Local Partners

- Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum and Cooperative
- Community of Dimen
 - Through the Museum initially



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Feasibility Assessment / Partners

Non-Local Partners

- Dong Ran, videographer and interpreter
- Ivy Zhang, interpreter
- Other short-term interpreters
- Jennifer Little, UOP Photography Professor
- University of the Pacific Powell Scholars



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Feasibility Assessment / Logistics / Finances

Cost Assessment

- Travel, food, lodging for team
 - \$4000 / person / month
- Funding dependent on small grants
 - Year to year
- Pro Bono
 - Services traded for discount at Museum
(need to pay for food / lodging / materials / transportation)



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If feasibility study positive

Create an overall plan / Develop Project Goals

1. Identify a potential project
2. Research: Critical Community Issues
3. Feasibility assessment
4. Create an overall plan
 - Set goals
 - For community
 - Team
 - Timeline
5. Develop the project (SEED)
6. Implement / Maximize impact through partners



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Set Goals /

Long-Term Project Goals

- Overall vision for Community
 - Defined by
 - Critical issues
 - Team / skills
 - Resources
 - Do not have to solve every problem in the community
 - But keep an eye for someone who can do what you cannot



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Set Goals /

What areas are not addressed?

- Songs / music / Kam opera (Dimen Dong Museum)
- Farming (Dimen Dong Museum)
- Men-dominated crafts like woodworking and basketry
- Architecture (books exist on Kam architecture)
- Shamanism / religion
- Healthcare / sanitation
- Education (in broader sense)
- ...



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Set Goals /

Long-Term Project Goals

- Team
 - Learning objectives for students
 - Discipline-based learning / personalized
 - General
 - Cross-cultural Collaboration / communication
 - Team work and management
 - Appreciation of different culture
 - Contribution to society

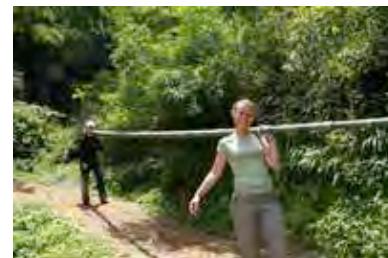


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Set Goals /

What can the team do to help?

- Provide design services
 - Develop design vocabulary / aesthetics based on existing art forms
- Cultural preservation
 - Document traditions and craft processes
- Education / local identity
 - Workshops
 - Train designers
 - Raise interest in local customs and traditions
 - Connect with young people and children



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Design Problem/

Project Mission

- Use design as a positive force both culturally and economically in the lives of the Dimen people.
- Preserve their heritage, and boost their identity and self-worth.
- Stimulate interest in their traditions.
- Help them achieve better living conditions without having them leave the village.



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Set Goals /

Level of Community Participation

1. Documentary
 - Observe and record existing artistic expressions
2. Immersion
 - Immersion into the culture's aesthetic values and way of thinking
 - Designing within those values
3. Active collaboration
 - Between the designer and locals
4. Empowerment of local artisans and designers
 - To create their own designs and carry their cultural heritage into the digital age



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Set Goals /

Revising and Refining Goals

- Set initial goals
 - Research
 - Community Response
 - Ex. Cultural preservation and local identity
- Revise goals
 - In-depth interviews with multiple community members
 - On-site observations
 - Ex. Living wages



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When goals set/

Develop Project

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Develop Project /

Method

- **Specific Sub-Projects**
 - Goals, outcomes, artifacts, measurement, timeline
- **Student learning**
 - Specific plan for how to achieve objectives
 - Pre- and post-trip questionnaires



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Set Goals /

Specific Goals for Each Trip / Sub-Project

- **Set realistic goals**
 - Example: Create a full set of Kam everyday attire for an adult woman
- **Fit to overall goals**
 - Cultural Preservation
 - Local Identity



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Develop Project /

Developing the Project Using SEED

- Social Economic Environmental Design:
 - Looking at the big picture
 - Context
 - People-centered
 - Method of organizing a complex project



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Develop Project /

Developing the Project Using SEED

- Critical Issues
- Design Response
- Methodology
- Community Involvement
- Design Results
- Measurement of Outcomes



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Develop Project /

What issues were addressed?

- Cultural heritage
- Local identity
- Living wages



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Develop Project /

Cultural Heritage: Design Response

- Documented and learned craft processes of Dimen matriarchs:
 - paper making
 - weaving
 - indigo dyeing
 - embroidery
- Collected local customs, stories, and folklore



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Develop Project /

Cultural Heritage: Method

- Apprenticeship
- Interviews
- Observations
- Descriptive writing and drawing
- Multimedia documentation (video, sound and photo)
- Replication of craft processes



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Develop Project /

Cultural Heritage: Community Participation

- Five Dimen matriarchs and their friends let us apprentice with them, invited us to outings and family activities
- Community members shared customs, stories, songs and other folklore



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Develop Project / Cultural Heritage: What were the results of design?

- Preservation of Kam culture
 - A record of Dimen crafts and other heritage exists
 - Will be accessible to community and researchers
 - Artifacts:
 - Dawn of the Butterflies manuscript
 - Short documentary movies, photographs, recordings
 - Collection of Dimen stories
 - Collection of embroidery patterns
 - Workshops (future)



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Develop Project / Cultural Heritage How were results measured or accounted for?

- Publication
- Use of data by researchers and villagers
- Questionnaires
 - Dimen inhabitants more aware of their culture (recognize stories, artifacts)



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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Design Response

- Village has unique customs, stories, songs and designs
- Design patterns predominantly represented in embroidery
 - Elderly masters have not embroidered in decades due to bad eye sight
 - Only two sisters know how to make patterns for new embroideries
- Young people out of touch with tradition



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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Methods

- Photographed embroideries and flower belts featuring local design motifs
- Interviewed and recorded original patterns for embroideries
- Digitized design motifs (vectors)



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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Methods

- Connected with young people
 - Children photographed their daily lives with disposable cameras
 - Interviewed young adults and created a graphic novel featuring them



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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Methods

- Workshops in the future
 - Non-traditional methods like screen printing
 - Combined with local motifs



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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Community Involvement

- Dimen women
 - shared their embroideries,
 - taught us how to embroider
 - answered questions regarding color, design aesthetics and concepts behind designs
- Wu Meng Xi showed how to make embroidery patterns
- Dimen shaman showed how to make magic paper cutouts



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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Community Involvement

- 10 children took pictures of their daily activities and surrounding
- 5 young adults were interviewed about their experiences and goals
- Dimen women will participate in teaching workshops to children and youth



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Develop Project / Local Identity

What were the results of design?

- Use of new / non-traditional tools to apply local identity with
- Boosting of local identity and self-worth
 - Raised awareness and interest by children



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Develop Project / Local Identity

What were the results of design?

Artifacts

- Digitized indigenous design motifs
 - Will be available to the village to use for promotion
- Through Young Kam Eyes Documentary Photos
- Their Then and Now Graphic Novel
- Items designed by community members at workshops



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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Results

- Through Young Kam Eyes
- Project created by Anastasya Uskov

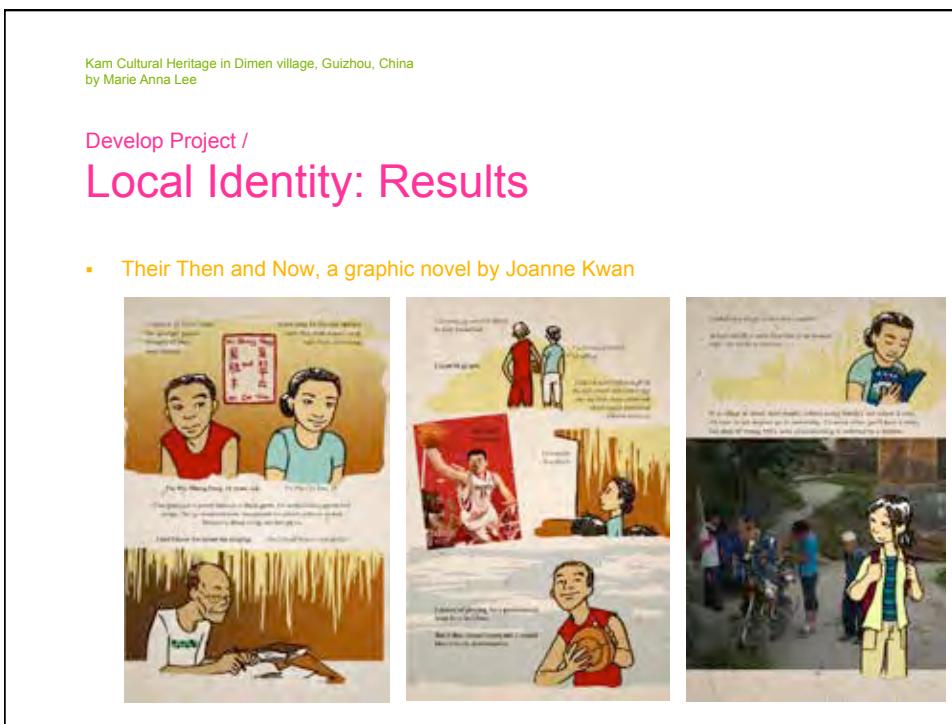


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Develop Project /

Local Identity: Results

- Their Then and Now, a graphic novel by Joanne Kwan



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Develop Project / Local Identity **How were results measured or accounted for?**

- Workshop participation and output
- Local designs based on indigenous aesthetics
- Attitude surveys



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Develop Project / **Living Wages: Design Response**

- Average yearly wage is US\$1000
 - Well below average for even rural China
- Migration to factories
 - Purely economic reason
 - Prefer to stay with family



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Develop Project /

Living Wages: Design Response

- Dimen Cooperative
 - Headed by Dimen Dong Eco Museum
 - To sell local produce and products across China and abroad
 - Regulated eco-tourism



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Develop Project /

Living Wages: Methods

- Design of collateral materials:
 - Visual identity
 - Website
 - Packaging
- In collaboration with Museum
- Based on interviews with Dimen artisans
- Grounded in indigenous aesthetics
- Color palette: embroideries
- Future: train local designers



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Develop Project /

Living Wages: Community Involvement

- Dimen Dong Eco Museum runs the Dimen Cooperative
 - Overseeing production, processing and distribution of goods to outside markets
 - Selective eco-tourism tours
 - Commissions specific design materials



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Develop Project /

Living Wages: Community Involvement

- Museum provided ideas and feedback for visuals
- Dimen artisans answered questions about color, aesthetics and concepts behind indigenous motifs



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Develop Project / Living Wages

What were the results of design?

- Outside market for Dimen's goods
- Growth in ecotourism
- Living wage enough to support family



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Develop Project / Living Wages

What were the results of design?

- Artifacts:
 - Visual identity, packaging, website



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Develop Project / Living Wages **How were results measured or accounted for?**

- Survey of family income
- Survey of # people employed in cooperative / self-employed x employment outside village
- # of eco tours



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Once project developed,

Implement / Maximize Impact Through Partners

1. Identify a potential project
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3. Feasibility assessment
4. Create an overall plan
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Maximizing Impact Through Partners

- One cannot and should not do a project based in a community alone
- Actively look for partners
- Nurture relationship
 - Define the role / relationship
 - Know their objectives
 - Communicate your objectives
 - Set specific project parameters and timeline



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Communication with partners

- Interdisciplinary collaboration
- Cross-cultural
 - Different habits
 - Meals / work
 - Values
 - Understanding of time
 - Appointments not binding



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Minimizing Misunderstandings

- Misunderstandings are on daily order
- Multiple ways to ascertain results
 - Interview
 - Record: Notes, video, sound, photo, illustration
 - Observe
 - Measure ingredients, time processes
 - Do with them
 - Find ingredients
 - Duplicate process by yourself
 - See larger picture



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Design Misunderstandings

- Example: wind and flower bridge
 - Concrete platform vs. wooden one
- Collaboration with locals can prevent these misunderstandings
 - Ask questions
 - Do not assume
 - Get feedback from those who know



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Dimen Dong Eco Museum

- Base for operations
 - Safe accommodation and food
 - Resources and materials
 - Kam-Mandarin interpreter
 - May be busy
 - Other conservation projects in Dimen
 - 100 Songs Projects
 - Cooperative
 - Support their efforts with design
- Government connections, permits
- Larger resources than us
- No English



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Dimen Dong Eco Museum

- No formal contract
 - No timeline
 - Copyright
- Solution
 - Define a relationship
 - Create a formal contract
 - Agree on a process, timeline...



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Dimen Matriarchs

Wu Meng Xi: Leonardo da Dimen > get to know the person



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Dimen Matriarchs

- Traditional knowledge
 - Apprentice with them
 - Let them set the pace
- Not used to teaching anybody
 - Observe, do, ask, make mistakes
- Well connected / respected
 - Let them make connections in community
- Humble, not aware of their worth
 - Respect
 - Serve
 - Share meals
 - Laugh
 - Touch



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Dimen Matriarchs

- Other commitments
 - Fields, family, friends
 - Follow them and learn new things
- Want to please
 - And tell you what you want to hear
 - Gain trust through time and care
- Speak some Mandarin
 - Make effort to learn Kam and Mandarin



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Maximizing Impact through Partners / Dimen Matriarchs

- Solution:
 - Be flexible
 - New opportunities and connections
 - Follow
 - Respect and humility
 - Serve
 - Listen
 - Laugh
 - Touch



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Maximizing Impact through Partners /

Interpreters

- Need interpreters from Kam and from Mandarin
- Lack of quality interpreters
 - Mandarin-English:
 - Volunteers or low pay
 - Do not have necessary vocabulary
 - Sometimes no interpreter
 - Kam-Mandarin:
 - Employed by the Museum
 - Have other tasks



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Maximizing Impact through Partners /

Interpreters

- Lessons:
 - Communication is key
 - Find funding to pay qualified interpreters
 - You cannot ask a volunteer to work around the clock and there has to be a benefit in the work for them



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Maximizing Impact through Partners /

Interpreters

- Solution:
 - Carefully document everything through video, sound, photo and notes
 - Verify, duplicate processes
 - Learn to do without an interpreter
 - Use gestures
 - Copy what others do
 - Learn basic vocabulary (Mandarin and Kam)
 - Treat interpreters with respect and help them achieve their personal goals



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Maximizing Impact through Partners /

Student team

- Undergraduate graphic design majors
 - Students can go only if they get funding
 - High demand, very competitive
- Find/nurture their strength and interest
 - Specific learning goals
- Various levels of experience
 - Training



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Maximizing Impact through Partners /
UOP Powell Scholar Program

- Honor student program at UOP
- Start English Program in elementary school in Dimen
 - Finances and manpower
- Partner to
 - Further our goals
 - Education
 - Fill gaps in our work
 - Connection with school
 - Prepare ground for our future projects
 - Add presence in our absence

