



## Kam Heritage Project

Dimen village, Guizhou Province, China

by Marie Anna Lee

*In cooperation with the Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum, Marie Anna Lee and her students have worked in and with the community of Dimen to preserve its cultural heritage, promote local identity and improve its living standards through various design methodologies. The project received 2013 and 2014 SEED award honorable mentions. Standing for Social Economic Environmental Design, SEED highlights best practices in the field of Public Interest Design.*



### Design Team (University of the Pacific)

Marie Anna Lee

Students Anastasya Uskov and Joanne Kwan  
Spring 2014 Arts 75: Graphic Design 1 Class

### (China)

Huang Yunyi, Joyce  
Zhang Menghui, Ivy  
Ran Dong

### Local Partners

- Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum and Cooperative
- Community of Dimen



### Problem Identifications

- Villagers cannot make ends meet using traditional methods
- High unemployment / low wages
- Dimen's culture endangered
- No written records

**Dimen village** 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. Dimen has been virtually isolated for centuries from the rest of the world and resisted modernization. Recently, the outside world has come to Dimen full force and visible changes are happening every year. Many people, especially the younger generation, have left for work in distant factories to provide for their families leaving fewer working-age people in the village.

**Cultural characteristics of the community /** 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 known for their carpentry skills and unique architecture. They have distinct crafts as well: weaving, dyeing cloth in indigo, embroidery, and papermaking.





### Cultural Preservation

Surrounded by deep mountains of Guizhou Province in south-central China, the Kam minority village of Dimen has developed 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 ones who often see anything traditional as irrelevant and useless. 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.

### Working Process / Design Response Summary

Collaborating with the Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum that resides in the village, Marie Lee and a team of undergraduate graphic design students at the University of the Pacific documented the unique craft processes: papermaking, 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.

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 recorded their craft processes through video, sound recordings, notes and drawings. They interviewed the women about their lives, their beliefs and values to gain perspective to their knowledge. 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.





Artisan Wu Mei Tz teaches Anastasya Uskov to pour pulp mixture on a screen to make a sheet of paper.



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.



With the help of artisans, Lee and her team have dyed fabric in indigo and made traditional garments worn by local women: light coat, pleated skirt and an apron similar to the one worn by the elderly woman pictured on next page.

#### *Community Involvement*

- 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

#### *Results of Design*

- Preservation of Kam culture
- A record of Dimen crafts and other heritage exists that will be accessible to community and researchers

#### *Artifacts*

- Dawn of the Butterflies manuscript
- Short documentary movies, photographs, recordings
- Collection of Dimen stories
- Collection of design motifs
- Workshops





### Local Identity

With a unique language, culture and history, the Dimen Kam have proudly resisted assimilation for centuries. However in the 1990s a large number of young people began to leave the village to make a more lucrative living in faraway factories. Television and satellite brought the mainstream Chinese culture to every home making the Kam want to be like everyone else.

### Working Process / Design Response Summary

In collaboration with the local Dimen Dong Eco-Museum, the team collected local stories and songs. They photographed embroideries, paper purses and woodcarvings. The motifs are being converted to vector graphics with help of the public as well as Pacific students. The motifs that will be given to the village to promote local identity.

The adult workshops gave the local artisans a way to express their aesthetics in contemporary contexts. The ultimate goal is to empower local artisans and designers to carry their local identity and cultural heritage into the digital age.

Screen printing workshops targeting the younger generation raised awareness of and stimulated interest in local identity and traditional crafts through combining local design motifs with non-traditional technology.

Pacific students have also created documentary projects involving children and young adults from Dimen. Lee's Graphic Design I class created a coloring book featuring Dimen animals. Lee distributed several copies among children during her 2014 workshops.



Dimen women wear a colorfully embroidered apron. This embroidery motif is very specific to the village. Christina Davis, a Graphic Design I student converted it to vector graphics and her team made decorative pillows adorned by the motif. The Dimen workshop participants made color separations using the motif and screen printed it on fabric.



Artisan Wu Meng Xi makes a flower motif template, reviews and edits the digital motif library, sorts through motif printouts and prints the flower motif on fabric.



### Community Involvement

- Dimen women shared their embroideries, taught us how to embroider and answered questions regarding color, design aesthetics and concepts behind designs
- Dimen shaman showed how to make magic paper cutouts
- Ten children took pictures of their daily activities and surrounding
- Five young adults were interviewed about their experiences and goals
- Museum staff participated in teaching workshops to children and youth

### What are the results of design?

- Boosting of local identity and self-worth
- Raising awareness and interest by children
- Senior community members taking a leadership role and teaching the younger generation about their heritage, culture and aesthetics
- Equipping artisans with simple techniques that can be applied without much technology but that are not seen as archaic / Workshop participants will apply and disseminate the design motifs to various projects after the workshops are finished

### Artifacts

- Dimen motif library
- Workshops
- Products designed by Pacific students in class
- Products designed by community members at workshops
- Singing Hands Label Products designed by artisans
- Through Young Kam Eyes Documentary Photos (Anastasya Uskov)
- Their Then and Now Graphic Novel (Joanne Kwan)
- Dimen Animals Coloring Book (Graphic Design I students)





Student Anastasya Uskov distributed disposable cameras to twelve middle-school children and had them document their daily lives: families, friends and their surroundings.



Student Joanne Kwan interviewed five young people about their experience in the village and created a graphic novel with a chapter devoted to each person. The novel is written in English with plans of translation into Chinese.



Spring 2014 Graphic Design I students created a coloring book based on Dimen animals to stimulate pride in local environment.



With support of the Museum, we organized two screen-printing workshops for children with sixteen and twenty-one in attendance respectively. The children learned to print first on paper and later on fabric. They were not familiar with the local motifs we used but thought of them as very beautiful. The children decorated their fabric with additional drawings in fabric crayons and markers. When there was no more fabric to use, they used plastic plates meant for organizing the supplies on tables to print on and decorate. The children stayed for two hours instead of one and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. We had six return students for the second workshop with two bringing drawings of their relatives embroideries to show us, a homework we gave them in the first workshop. At the end, children proudly signed their names under their artwork. We collected it to iron it and delivered it next day to their school. A group helped clean after the workshop and came to draw with us the next day.



### Living Wages

The average yearly wage in Dimen village is US\$1000, well below the average for even rural China. Young and middle-aged people seek employment in faraway factories. Meanwhile in the village, tourists have increasingly seduced the Kam to sell their precious heirlooms that have been in the families for generations robbing them and their future generations of their heritage and identity. The heirlooms cannot be replaced since the craft skills have either been lost or the elderly artisans cannot physically do the craft anymore and the young ones do not know how to. Even if the villagers were able to recreate the artifacts that they sell, the time spent on creating them is vastly disproportionate to the money they get from the sale.

### Solution

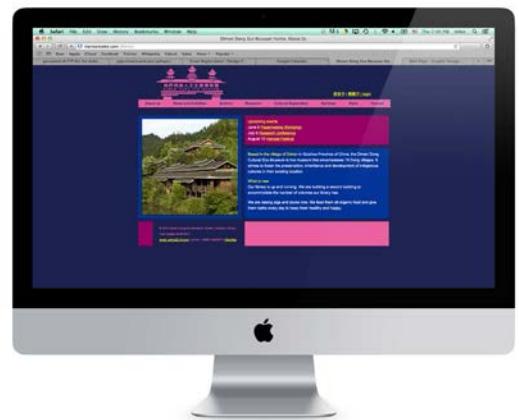
By making simple artifacts with local aesthetics, Dimen artisans can generate income without loosing their irreplaceable treasures. Sale of artifacts to tourists /abroad will complement income from agricultural production and allow the village make sustainable living. People will have no need to leave the village to make ends meet.

### Working Process / Design Response Summary

Since 2007, Lee has worked with the Dimen Dong Eco Museum on various promotional materials. She designed visual identities, multi-lingual websites, and proposed packaging for local products and crafts.

The museum works on helping the villagers make sustainable living in the village by working the fields or selling their products. The Museum founded a cooperative where the farmers grow organic produce at fair price. Based on Lee's screen printing workshops held at the Museum, the staff is developing products that bear local aesthetics and that can be sold locally, in China and abroad.

By buying Dimen produce and products, outsiders will support existing production and stimulate growth. 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. Moreover, Dimen inhabitants will develop a sense of pride in their heritage and will maintain their ethnic identity and some degree of independence from mainstream Chinese culture.



Marie Anna 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.

#### *What will be the results of design?*

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

#### *Artifacts*

- Visual identity
- Packaging
- Website
- Trade items





In collaboration with Lee and the Dimen Eco Museum, local artisans have started developing products that can be sold locally, in China and abroad under the label Singing Hands. Following the fair trade model, all profits generated by Singing Hands go directly to the artisans who decide how to invest them in their community.

Grounded in local aesthetics, the products merge tradition with contemporary design. They are hand-crafted from local materials with utmost care, each piece getting an individualized treatment by the artisan as she reflects on the unique properties of the material. The fabric is handmade on a traditional wooden loom and then hand-dyed with local plants. As a result of the weaving and dyeing process, the fabric is very strong and durable. As part of their centuries old tradition, the artisans use local sources, and reuse and recycle materials whenever possible.

The local artisans will eventually make sustainable living in the village as opposed to working on faraway factories, and at the same time retain their local identity in the increasingly global environment.



Marie Anna Lee is an assistant professor of Graphic Design at the University of the Pacific in California. Her work and teaching focus on communication design with an emphasis on community-based design, cultural sustainability and interdisciplinary collaboration. Her commercial design ranges from posters and print materials to interactive pieces and websites for clients from USA, China and the Czech Republic.

Lee was born in the Czech Republic and came to US in 1996 to study at Michigan State University. She taught communication design at Metropolitan State College of Denver (2005-07) and applied art at School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong (2007-09). Lee holds a BFA and an MFA in Graphic Design from Colorado State University and a BA in Advertising from Michigan State University.

Marie Anna Lee's work in Dimen started in 2007 when she co-managed the Guizhou Ethnic Minorities project at City University of Hong Kong. The school sent groups of students to document the Kam minority people of Dimen village in China over the next two years. The project resulted in several exhibitions in Guizhou and Hong Kong, and a multi-dimensional documentary archive which included film, photography and audio recordings.

In 2010, Lee spent four weeks working with several elderly Dimen artisans on documentation and preservation of their unique knowledge. Together with her student Anastasya Uskova, Lee learned the various art and craft techniques never before recorded, which would otherwise be forgotten. In 2011, she continued developing the project with focus on the complex indigo-dyeing techniques. She is in process of writing a book on the experience entitled "Dawn of the Butterflies." The book celebrates the wisdom and closely-guarded knowledge of the village matriarchs by recording and illustrating their arts and the processes associated with their traditional crafts.

Lee conducted a series of screen printing workshops in Dimen in 2014 to promote local identity and develop new ways to create products with indigenous aesthetics. During the workshops, she closely worked with seven Dimen Dong Cultural Eco Museum staff, four of whom are from the village. She also organized two workshops for children with sixteen and twenty-one in attendance respectively. Throughout the whole project, Lee and her students were supported by their Chinese team members: Huang Yunyi, Zhang Menghui and Dong Ran.

After establishing the artistic methods and gathering the local folklore, Marie Anna Lee's long-term goal is to raise leaders in the village who are proud of their heritage and who will bring the village through its transformation to modernity without destroying its culture. Similarly, she wants to nurture talented children into artisans and designers who will take their unique aesthetics and bring it to the digital age.