

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

## Kam Cultural Heritage in Dimen, China

Marie Anna Lee  
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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 侗族

- 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)

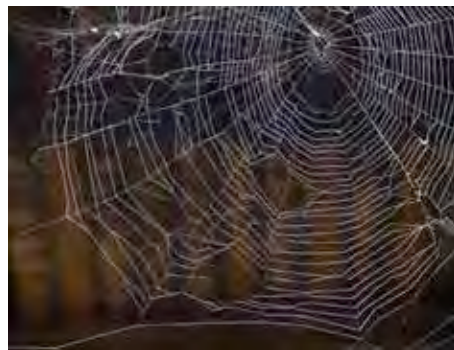


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If feasibility study positive

## 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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## 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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## 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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## 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
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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## 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 though 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

