Dimen in Transition

The village of Dimen, one of the few homes to the Kam people of China, has been secluded from the world for countless generations. This isolation allowed the Kam to develop a unique culture and maintain their ancestor's heritage without interruption. However, the tumultuous changes of modernity have reached even Dimen, and over the past several decades the Kam have found themselves caught in between maintaining their cultural roots and assuming the trends and values of mainstream Chinese culture. In an attempt to preserve the old and document the new, students and faculty from the Department of Visual Arts here at Pacific have captured the changing times in photography, film, writing and drawing.

Professor Marie Lee, whose passion for the Kam culture spearheaded this project, presents research into the intricate and secret arts and crafts of Dimen's matriarchs. Professor Jennifer Little contrasts the lives of traditional village families with their counterparts, who left the village for the city. Student Joanne Kwan explores the lives of young Kam people, reflecting on her own roots and defining the role of cultural identity and preservation of cultural values in today's terms. Finally, student Anastasya Uskov provides a brief, unfiltered glance at the village as seen through the eyes of Kam children using a disposable camera for the first time.

Together these projects explore a world both beautiful and rugged, and its transition, physically and culturally, into a new age.

Marie Lee: Legacy of the Matriarchs

For centuries, Dimen mothers taught their daughters not only how to tend to their household, livestock, and fields, but also many unique crafts and songs. These traditions carried the unwritten history and wisdom of their ancestors and culture. In time, the village developed unique designs and songs that distinguished it from other Kam communities.

This system was well suited for the agricultural life, but started breaking down in recent decades when young people learned they could make an easier living outside of the village. By moving out of the village, they felt the old values did not apply to them any more. The elders, humble in their ways, did not consider what they knew as valuable and did not insist on the younger generations learning their ancient teachings. Without their histories written and their craft methods recorded, their unique culture suddenly became endangered.

The matriarchs who can still sing the songs and do the crafts are aged now and their memory is beginning to falter. Still, the grannies weave cloth that is smooth and strong, dye fabric to the richest indigo blue and spend days folding miniature pleats for stiff skirts that last only one year, because Kam traditional clothes cannot be washed. Yet, the women spend every free moment embroidering sleeves, hems, hats and purses in the bright colors of the nature that surrounds the village. From dawn to dusk, their days are filled with backbreaking labor but they always have a song on their lips and are quick to laugh.

In the summer of 2010, Marie Lee came to Dimen to apprentice with these women, if only for a month, along with her student Anastasya Uskov. With insatiably inquisitive mind and quick wit, she became Lee’s second set of eyes, double checking all the processes and helping her to replicate the crafts as faithfully as possible. Jennifer Little helped document the process. In 2011, accompanied by Anastasya and Joanne Kwan, another graphic design student at the University of the Pacific, Lee went back for another round of apprenticeship, this time for three weeks. Their efforts resulted in a complete set of garments Dimen women would wear for everyday use, made under the grandmas’ guidance.

Joanne Kwan: Their Then and Now

To see how a group of people live on the other side of the world, in conditions unfamiliar to us, is an eye-opening experience. This is especially true for the Kam people (they are commonly referred to as the Dong, which is the name given to them by Han Chinese. Thus I use it here.) As a Chinese ethnic minority, they are even more obscure to westerners than the Han majority.

The Dong lifestyle is completely different from ours and yet they still enjoy the same things, family, food, and good company. Also, like many Chinese Americans, they face an ever-shifting predicament of assimilation into mainstream culture. In America, we learn English and embrace western culture. For the Dong, they learn Mandarin and adopt Chinese culture as defined by the Han.

The village of Dimen is constantly changing; nothing is the same from year to year. Aspects of their culture are in danger of going extinct. Hopefully a look into the lives of Dimen's people will raise questions of how their traditions can be preserved and how our own individual familial customs can be as well.

Anastasya Uskov: Through Young Kam Eyes

The summer heat is sweltering above the village of Dimen, even as the sun sits low in the sky. Having spent all morning working the fields, most of the village won't stir until dusk. However all isn't quiet, as the children of Dimen romp through the village square and the river below, catching dragonflies and jumping from logs into pockets of deep water. Every year, once their summer vacation begins, these children return to Dimen while their parents remain in distant cities, working in factories to support their families. Many of these children will find themselves following in their parents' footsteps as early as 16 years old, but for now, Dimen is their summer sanctuary.

In an effort to capture a very different view of Kam life, Anastasya Uskov traveled to Dimen with a dozen disposable cameras. With the help of Marie Lee, Anastasya was able to give cameras to children throughout the village. There were only a few guidelines - not to take all the photos in one day, and to take photos of things the children liked or were important to them. With only a short training on how to use the cameras, the children went forth to capture their world on film for the first time.

The resulting photographs show a world hidden from the prying eyes of foreigners. Overwhelmingly, the children took photos of their families, capturing elusive smiles on grandparents and younger siblings. Some offer a look into homes, and many explore the mountains and village rooftops. But most of all, each group of photos offers a glimpse into the values of these children before they find themselves caught up in the quickly changing world of adulthood.

Although the photographs were developed once Anastasya returned to the United States, she will send all of the photos back to Dimen this summer to be given to the children who took them. In all, nine children created a set of photos and returned the cameras, to whom goes out a special thanks: Wu Ming Xiong, Wu Rong Kang, Wu Sheng Feng, Wu Tuo Kun, Wu Xiang Xia, Wu Xiang Yin, Wu Xin Ju, Zhi Li, and Wu Zhi Mei.