Their Then and Now

an illustrative and
photographic journal

By Joanne Kwan

Foreword

A trip to a bucolic village in China is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I am very glad that I was able to go. No slideshow or detailed article could have prepared me for what I was about to experience as I stepped off the tiny jet in Liping. I have seen villages like Dimen on travel shows before, but to actually go there and spend three weeks in the village is something else entirely. I learned much from the trip, about the Dong culture and how people lived. It really broadened my worldview. I was allowed to understand this village on a different level, a level deeper than just perhaps seeing it on T.V. While I was there I got a real sense of who these people are and how they worked as a community, passing on their traditions and making their living.

I also learned a few things about conducting interviews on the trip, as that was part of my project. Firstly, one must speak on the terms of the person one is interviewing. If they are not comfortable, then that does not help either party; so chatting about some of their interests usually eases them. Secondly, it is important to be flexible as their daily schedules are not certain, especially in Dimen when there is always work to be done. Also, eye contact is always important of course. The most difficult aspect is that it is hard to earn people's trust, especially in such a short time span and when you are a foreigner. This trip I was very grateful to have our wonderful translator as she was familiar with many of the people already. She is a reporter and I was always attentive to her techniques.

It was interesting to go as a Chinese-American. I was something of an oddity and the villagers were intrigued that I did not speak Mandarin. One shopkeeper had the idea that all Americans were blonde. Even though I am of Chinese descent and my great-great-grandparents probably did farm like the villagers of Dimen, I was aware that I am a part of a completely different culture, the American culture. I am proud that I am, because with all of these different ways of living, it just makes the world a more colorful and exciting place.

I was glad to make this trip to Dimen and I feel all the better for it. 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. Their lifestyle is completely different from ours and yet they still enjoy the same things, family, food, and good company. The Dong of Dimen are very gracious people, invitations to see their work and eat a meal were made every week we were there. I arrived as a foreign tourist but I left as a friendly acquaintance.

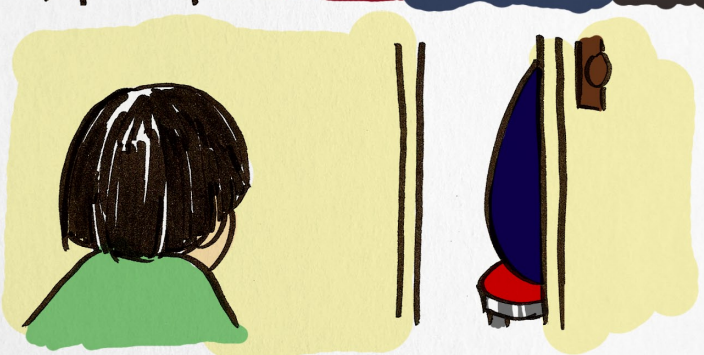
Joanne Kwan



My name is Lira Tam.

Born and raised in San Francisco's China Town, I never heard much spoken besides aggressive Cantonese and the babbling English of tourists.





However, once in a while, something else would grace my ears.

Once in a while, my grandma would sing.





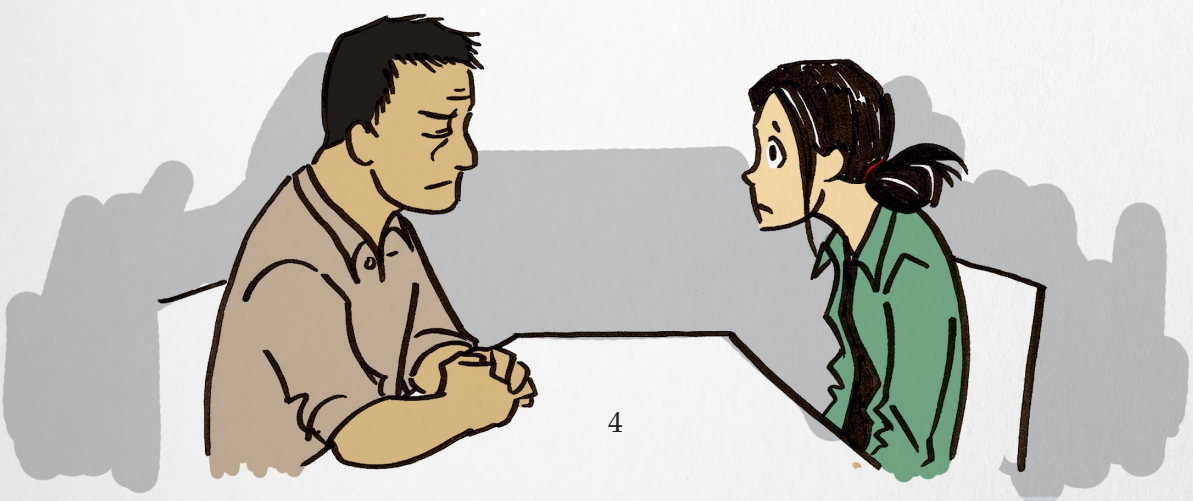
It wasn't the Madarin I would hear spoken in Chinese dramas. It was a language from a faraway place, imbued with the sounds of nature; of vistas and animals not found in the Bay Area, or anywhere in the U.S. I would imagine. Despite the diversity of San Francisco; I never came across that language.

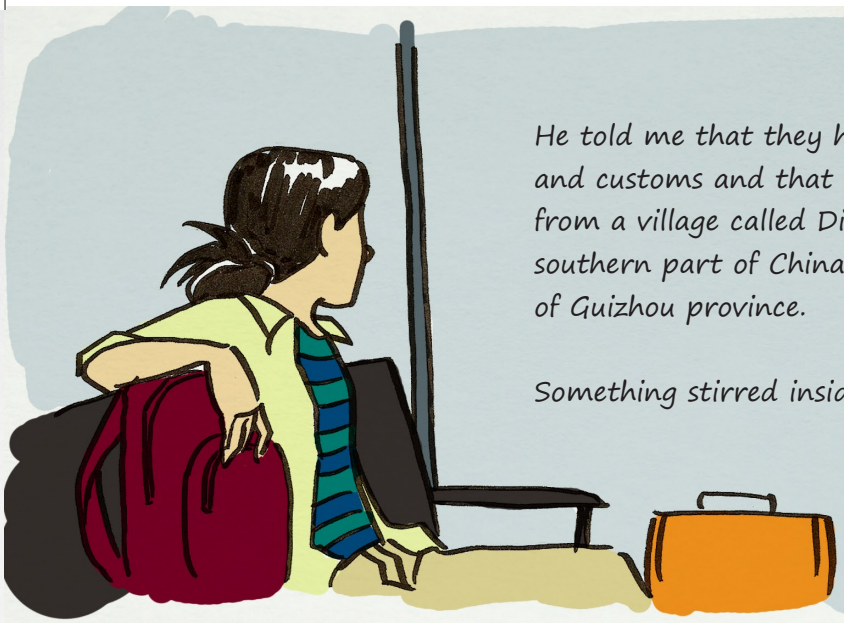




Then one day...my questions were answered...under ill circumstances.

My father told me his family's story... how his father met his mother...how they ended up in the states. But he also explained how his mother was part of a Chinese ethnic minority called the Dong people.





He told me that they had their own language and customs and that my grandma came from a village called Dimen located in the southern part of China on the eastern edge of Guizhou province.

Something stirred inside me.

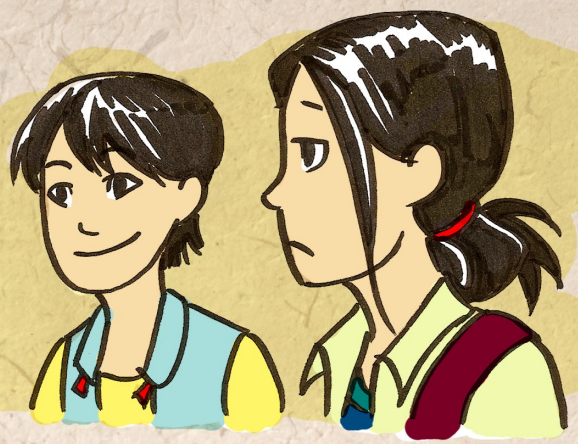
And now, I'm on my way to my grandmother's hometown.



Or rather homevillage. Culture-shock, anyone?



My 2nd cousin Ivy came along from Beijing as a translator. Most people here in Dimen can speak Mandarin nowadays. Helpful to them. Not me. I speak only English and some Cantonese, and 3 years worth of high school French all but forgotten.



I can pick up some things that Ivy speaks with them. Some Mandarin words are similar to Cantonese, but I mostly stick with "Ni hao" and "Shi Shi" —basic stuff.



I sometimes stare longingly at Ivy conversing with the villagers, it's like the words are within my grasp but not. So close, yet I've never felt further.





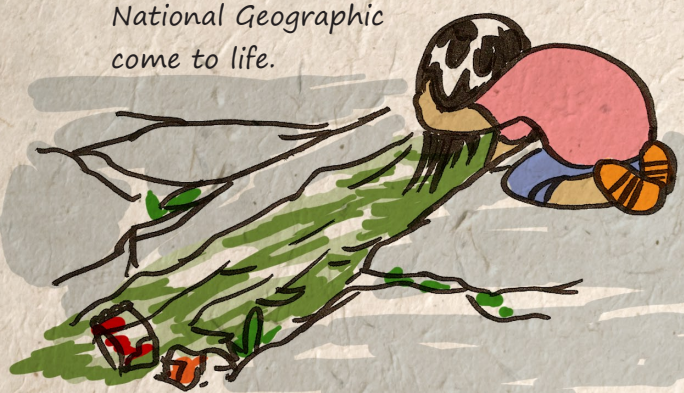
Ivy was unable to dig up any new information on my grandma's past life. Whatever memories of her in the minds of her friends and cousins have all been extinguished; if not, then the people themselves have passed. Her generation is gone now.



I wasn't expecting to find out much more about my dear grandmother; instead, I now am set on learning about the culture that gave my grandma those beautiful songs to sing... in that language that has eluded me for all those years until now.



The living conditions in the village don't surprise me too much. I sort of expected it after watching so many travel shows on T.V. It was like National Geographic come to life.





But once you look beyond the nitty gritty of the litter filled water channels, you see the mountains.





Village life is simply...well...just life. It is how these people live, what they were born and raised with. Kids don't have the fancy toys we're used to at home. Here, they catch dragonflies and play in the dirt piling up stones. This was how my parents spent their time, growing up in Hong Kong. I kind of wish I had this growing up.

Having nature and your surroundings become your plaything and being so enthralled with something so simple...it's nice.



Animals roam freely except for pigs and horses.
They are valuable. The dogs here are resolvedly skittish; probably because they know they're eaten here.

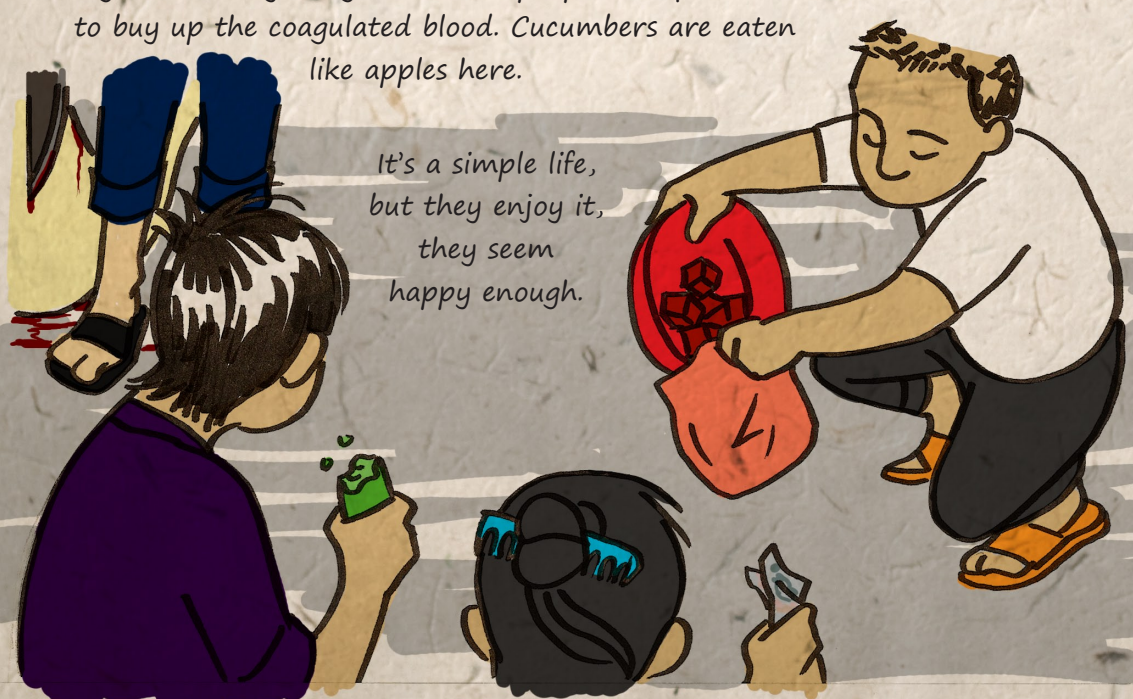


No market, they grow their own produce.

Except on special days when a truck comes by to sell watermelons.

Pigs are freshly slaughtered and people are quick to buy up the coagulated blood. Cucumbers are eaten like apples here.

It's a simple life, but they enjoy it, they seem happy enough.





Ivy and I decided to get to know some people, and visit them.
People here are quite friendly. Of course, it's easier if you speak Mandarin.
The prime occupation in this village is farming.



Then you have some carpenters, though most men pitch in when a new house is being built. Fires are especially dangerous here as the houses are wooden. New houses get brick or concrete first floors to assuage this threat. There are also butchers, and shopkeepers...you get the drift.



I wanted to know what the younger people thought of their own futures.

There may be limited options here, but that doesn't stop kids from dreaming.



I'm Wu Sheng Feng, 14 years old.

I'm Wu Cui Yun, 19.

Our grandpa is pretty famous in these parts. He writes Dong opera and songs. The government even recognized his efforts with an award. However, those songs are lost on us.

I don't have the talent for singing.

And I must focus on my studies.



Growing up we both liked to play basketball.



I want to go pro.

I'm leaving it behind for college.

I did not score high enough on the high school exit exam to get into my first choice university which taught traditional Chinese medicine.



My idol is Yao Ming.

I wanted to be a doctor.



I dream of playing for a professional team here in China.

But if that doesn't work out, I would like to study mathematics.



I settled on a college to learn to be a teacher.

At least this life is easier than that of my younger sister. She works in a factory.



In a village of about 500 people (where every family's last name is Wu), it's rare to see anyone go to university. It's more often you'll hear a story like that of Noong Mei's. Who coincidentally is married to a teacher.







I'm Wu Noong Mei,
23 years old.

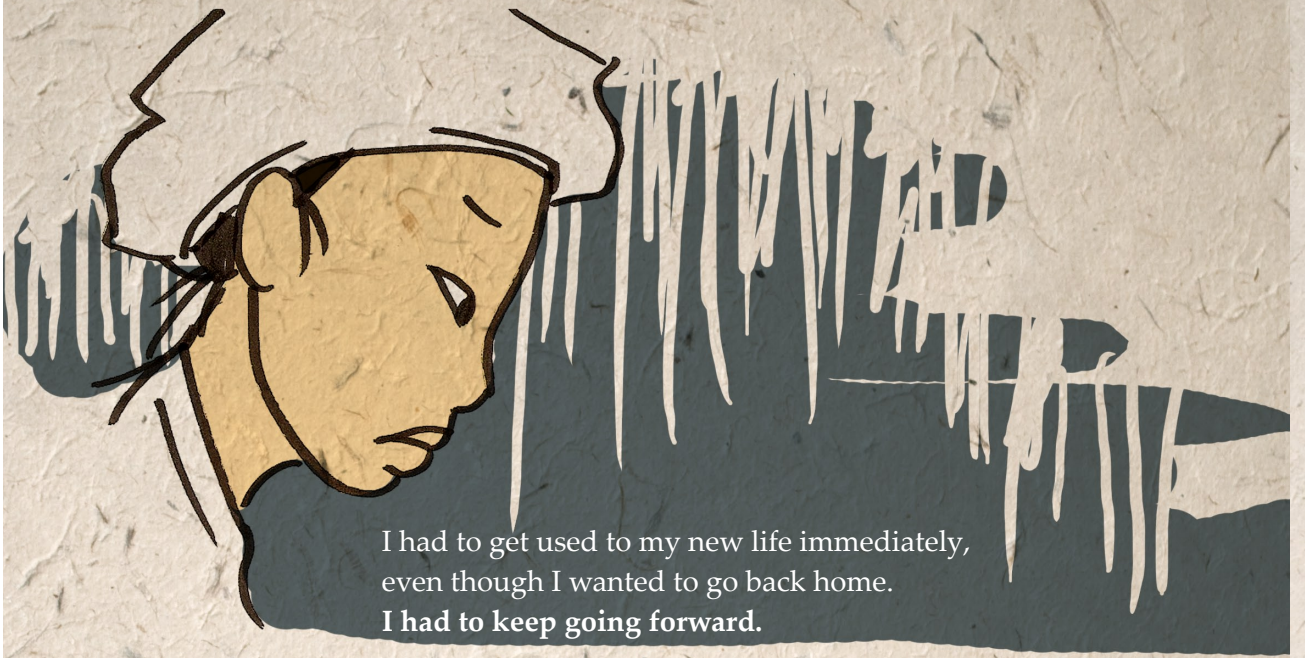
At the age of 15, I left home to go work in a factory. I wasn't pushed by my parents.



I was curious about the outside world.



The factory made DVD players. My job was to put one component into another. I had to finish 1,700 units a day.



I had to get used to my new life immediately,
even though I wanted to go back home.
I had to keep going forward.

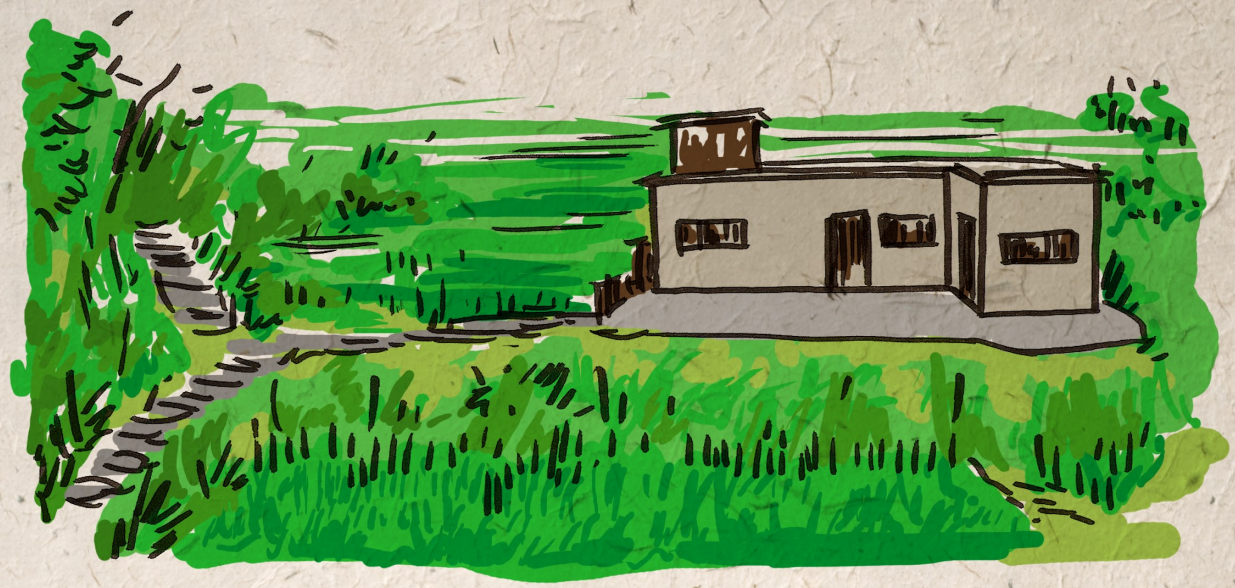


Every day, work began at 7:30 AM with an hour and a half lunch break at noon. Then we'd continue working until 6:30 and then eat dinner. the factory provided food and housing and I made many friends.

When I started working in 2003, we received 500 RMB a month.
In 2006 it was raised to 1,100 RMB a month.



(RMB = Chinese Yuan Renminbi
1 RMB is about 16 U.S. cents.)



And so I worked until 2010 when I married a man my parents had introduced. We moved back to Dimen.

We had our first child in 2011.

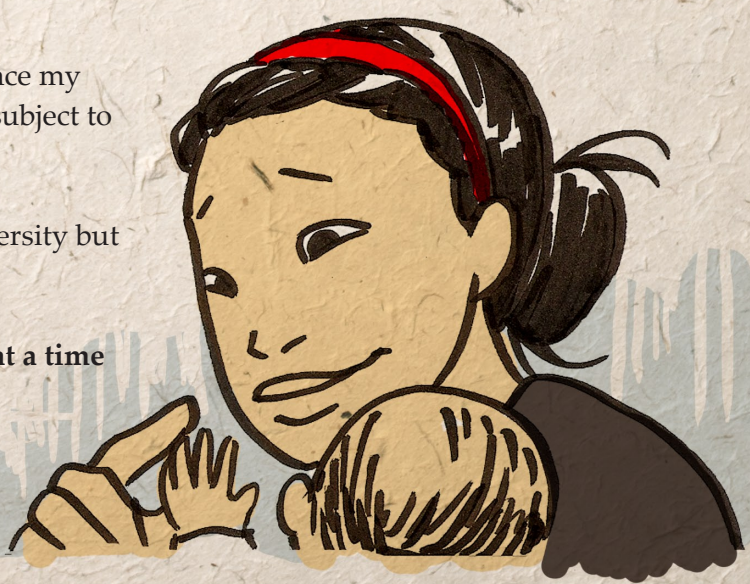


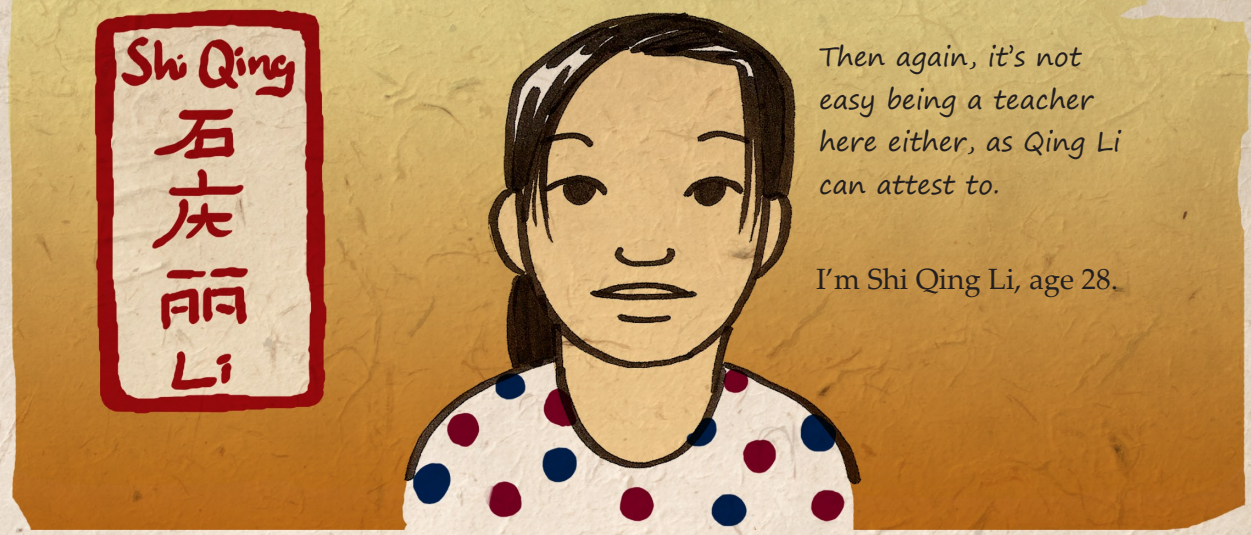
It was a complicated birth, c-section, modern medical procedures saved her life.

She will be our only child. Since my husband is a teacher, we are subject to the One Child Policy.

I would like her to go to university but I am not certain of her future.

We can only take it one day at a time and keep going forward.





Then again, it's not easy being a teacher here either, as Qing Li can attest to.

I'm Shi Qing Li, age 28.

I've always wanted to be a teacher since I was a child. I'm from Lei Dong, a village even smaller than Dimen. So it took a lot for my family to send me to normal school as one year's study fee was 5,000 RMB.

(Normal school = what they call schools where students learn to become teachers.)

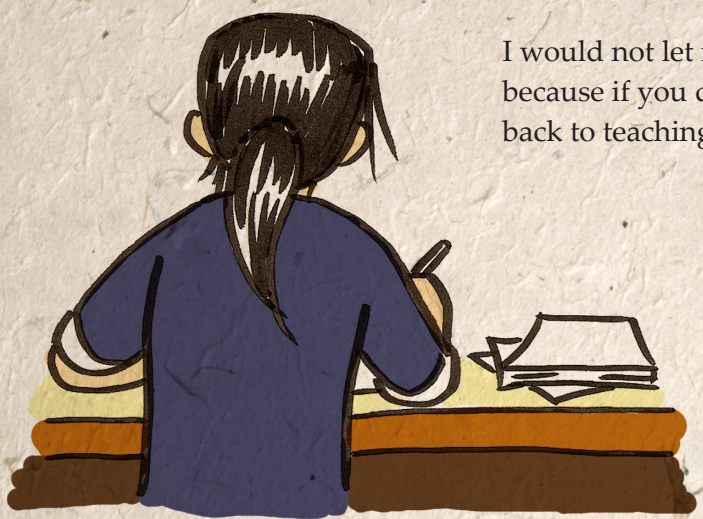
Even once I was out of school, a teaching position is not certain. The government will issue an exam any time a teaching position is available. The exam consists of a written portion and a speaking portion.



For 3 years I worked temporary jobs as government secretaries, civil servants, and substitute teachers.

I also met my husband (also a teacher), during that time; though he already had a permanent job.





I would not let myself work in a factory because if you do that, there is no going back to teaching.

In 2009, I got married to my husband and I moved to his home in Dimen. We had our daughter.

Then finally at last, I got a permanent teaching position.



It was in my home village of Lei Dong.

So I commute.

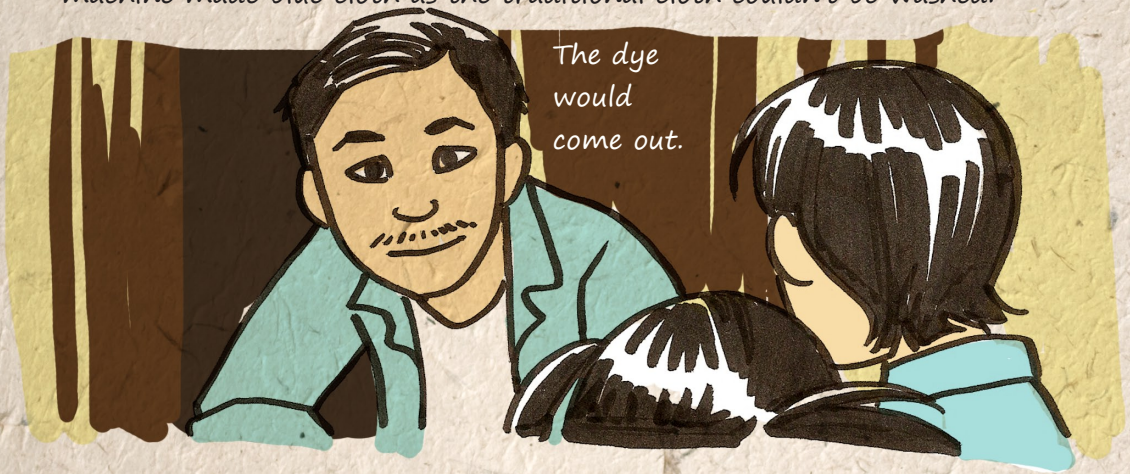
As people continue to seek higher educations and better jobs, the standard of living rises. And with that, modern conveniences present a daunting threat to the more traditional aspects of Dong life.





While holidays and ceremonies are easy to observe and practice, other aspects of this culture are more difficult to pass on. Crafts take time—time the younger generation doesn't have. Also, to put it bluntly, some of the crafts are also impractical.

We were speaking with one man and he mentioned that he preferred machine made blue cloth as the traditional cloth couldn't be washed.



All of the villagers wear either western-style clothes or clothes made from machine-manufactured fabric. The only time I see anything traditional is when some elderly women occasionally put on their handmade garments or when visiting officials are welcomed by the women's choir.





We were given a brief summary of how the cloth was prepared and dyed. It was a lot of work. It made me ponder though, would anyone appreciate the old techniques of making clothes as performed by American colonists? Sure some historical buffs and enthusiasts, but would the larger population care?

I wonder if it's the same case here in Dimen. In America and Europe, once things became industrialized, we never looked back. The only time I even hear about weaving on a loom is at a Renaissance fair or at colonial Williamsburg.

(The dyed cloth is used to make the various parts of the traditional Dong costume.)





(Tourists typically just come to visit for a day.)

People have described this village as a living fossil of sorts. I suppose what comes closest to that at home is colonial Williamsburg, but it is hard to compare the two. Williamsburg is a tourist attraction, where people dress up in costume and spit out historical facts and such. And while there are often Chinese tourists coming through Dimen and its neighboring Dong villages, this is the way the people live.

They didn't choose to live like this. It just is. And I suppose that's exactly why you can't keep the outside world from invading and protect this place and its people from modernizing. It was bound to happen.





Now families have TV sets, stereos, dvd players, washing machines, and refrigerators, and a great number of villagers have mobile phones, most of the young people do.



Young men ride motorbikes, the only bicycles I've seen were ridden by 10 year old boys.



Wu Dong
吴冻霞
Xia



We met another girl, one with solid aspirations and strong ties to her culture...

My name is Wu Dong Xia, and I'm 23 years old.



My older sister has a family, she looks after her child and occasionally goes off to do factory work.

My older brother is expecting his first child and is home in Dimen to look after his wife.



I am the youngest sibling and I'm currently going to university to study management.

I hope to get a job with the government because it's stable.





My brother works in Liping at a hotel performing Dong songs for guests.

He can also make the instruments he plays, the pei-pah and the yee-woo. Not many people can do that these days.



I myself can sing a few Dong songs. I learned by listening to the other villagers.

I even placed in the top twenties out of 900 contestants in a recent local singing competition.

It seems the most Dong-ish things that are the easiest to pass down besides holidays and customs, is language and music. It's nice to know their language is not extinct yet. And I am comforted by the fact that those songs I heard years before did not pass from this Earth with my grandmother.

But Dong Xia raised me a question when I asked if she would teach her own children the Dong language. She said it would depend on where she would raise her kids. It made sense to me as I imagined she would move somewhere where Mandarin was the one and only language spoken when she got a job.

But there was something else in my mind, the whole trip one thought nagged at me. "You look like them, yet you can't speak Mandarin." Dong Xia brought that to my immediate attention and asked why I can't understand Mandarin.

Well I had to defend myself. Mandarin was not needed to function where I grew up. I needed Cantonese to communicate with my family and I needed English to communicate with the rest of America. It all boiled down to making the best situation for yourself and assimilating.

Choosing your own path, everyone being entitled to their own future, things these next guys we met would probably agree upon.

I learned a lot during this trip, but I really got a sense of what culture means to these people from hearing the boys' story.





I'm Wu Jin Bin, 22.

I'm Wu Jin Rong, 19.

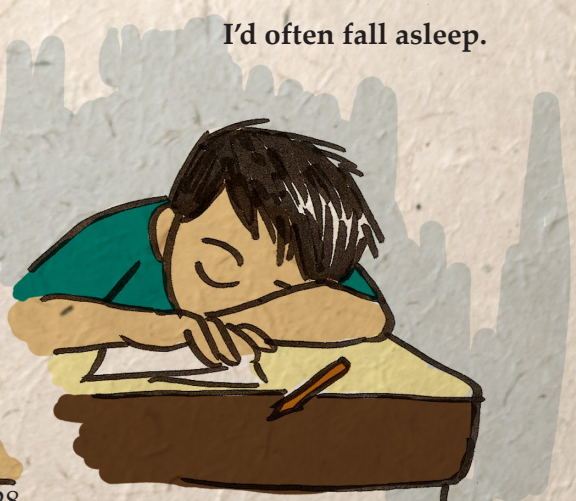


As kids we loved going around the fields to catch lizards and snakes. We'd also play basketball.

In school I'd doodle on the pages of my workbooks.



I'd often fall asleep.





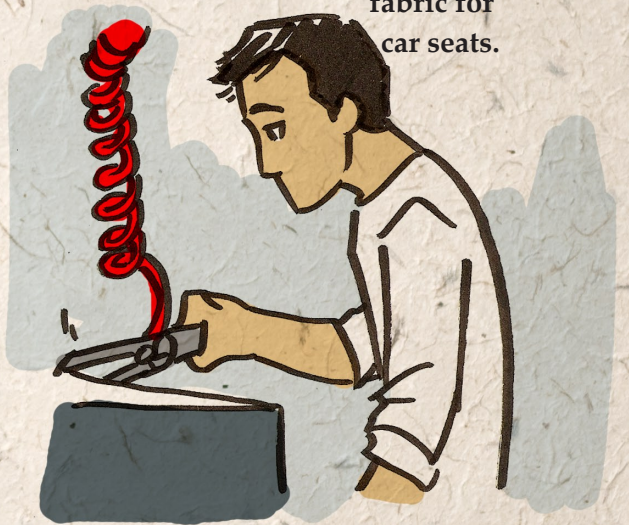
Later I found a mentor to teach me drawing and painting. Now I go to university in the capital of our province to study art.



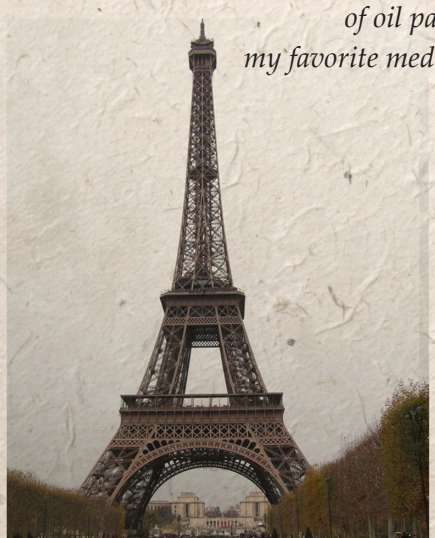
I left Dimen with my uncle to work in a factory. I currently cut fabric for car seats.



My dream is to go to France someday and really capture the spirit of oil paints, my favorite medium.



I dreamt of going into the army. But they refused me since I had a tattoo.





People were skeptical about my ambitions. The arts were for children. But now my parents see it is the right path for me and are supportive.

It is not shameful to work in a factory. It's normal for many people all around the country. There are other paths besides university.

I don't think we've changed much since we were kids.
He's a little taller and I got a scar from a motorbike accident.





Besides, when we go home to Dimen for the holidays, it feels as it has always been.



That's the thing, they may not have much to do with traditional Dong crafts or songs but it's their relationship to each other, their family, and this place, Dimen, their home, their roots—that's their culture, that's what separates them from the 1.3 billion plus Han Chinese around the world.

As long as they're still here, as long as they remember their past and are confident in their future, their culture will not be extinguished.

— Lira Tam
2011



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Palatino Linotype, bold and italics, 11 pt, 14 pt, and 24 pt
Segoe Print 10 pt, 30 pt, and 72 pt