

Introduction

The Kam (i.e., 侗族 ‘Dong’) community is a minority ethnic group, mainly residing in the borderland regions of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi, in the subtropical mountainous regions of Southern China (See Figure 1). According to a Chinese national census, the Kam population in 2010 was 2.87 million (Population Census Office of State Council 2012), with the majority of the Kam ethnicity residing in rural areas. Kam villages sustain themselves through traditional farming, and interlace with villages of the Han, Miao, and other ethnic groups, who also inhabit these regions in Southern China. Over the past few decades, the Kam socio-economic environment has transformed rapidly and profoundly. For example, mobility for this ethnic minority has increased in scope and frequency, largely owing to the increasing migration of these rural populations to large urban localities, to pursue educational and professional opportunities. Similarly, the rapid development of societal infrastructure, particularly in roads and transport, has transformed Kam inhabited areas into important destinations for rural tourism. To add to this, local ethnic minorities are seeking and/or negotiating their cultural and ethnic identities, while widespread institutionalised education has transformed the knowledge practices of groups such as Kam communities, where an increasing number of the younger community now receive higher education and exposure to outside worlds. These factors all profoundly impact on Kam ethnic identity.

At present, most Kam people are bilingual in at least two languages; the Kam language and standard Mandarin Chinese (or a local Chinese dialect). Traditionally, there was no Kam orthography, as the Kam people retain historical records only through oral accounts, such as through the Kam grand choirs as their main cultural heritage. As such, Kam sense of identity has been problematized, and yet, scholarship has produced little work on these linguistic identities, more so, through ethnographic work.

To address this issue, in this study, I present and analyse narratives of Kam people. These narratives address the relationships between Kam people’s sense of membership in their changing communities, and the beliefs and social practices that define this sense of membership. I collected these narratives during an ethnography of selected Kam communities, more specifically, the Zhanli Village, in Congjiang County, a traditional Kam village with 168 households and 791 inhabitants. The village is approximately 25 km from the Congjiang County site, in the Qiandongnan Miao and Kam (or Dong) Autonomous prefecture, in Guizhou province, in China (see Figure 1 below). According to local oral histories, Kam ancestors migrated to Congjiang County, from Guangxi and other southern regions, approximately 700 years ago.

In this paper, I adopt a social interactional approach, to investigate the ways in which the Kam ethnic identity represent and negotiate their identities in interviews against a backdrop

of rapid socio-economic transformation in contemporary China. I locate themes or factors that impact on the representation of Kam identity, such as mobility, education, career, interethnic interaction, and the relationships, acceptance of and attitudes towards own identity, as well as accounts of government practices to rejuvenate the Kam ethnicity.

In the second section, *Ethnography of Identities*, I review previous work on the narrative as a discursive activity during the construction of ethnic identity, to develop a theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis of my data. In the third section, the *Methodical Framework*, I discuss my main framework, linguistic ethnography, and explore ways of analysing the ethnic identity embedded in and emergent from the narratives I have documented. In the fourth section, the *Description of Findings*, I present and analyse the various motifs emerging from my own data, e.g., ethnic identity, distance from home, mobility experience, and education. For analytical purposes, the framework has categorized the participants into three groups in view of their education, life experience, and external mobility. This categorisation evolved from my preliminary ethnographic observations. In the fifth section, the *Discussion*, I discuss the significance of framing the narrative as a discursive activity and consider the ways in which this analysis can supplement work on ethnic identity in China.



Figure 1: Map of the Kam region

This paper will, then, offer a window through which to view the contemporary status of the Kam communities and their relationship with other ethnic groups, particularly the Han (i.e., the major ethnic group in China that constitutes approximately 92% of the total Chinese population). Methodically, this paper documents and examines the perspectives of Kam people with diverse educational backgrounds and life experiences on the reconstruction and representation of their ethnic identities. Here, factors such as geographical distance from home, mobility experience, and education, substantially impact on perceptions of this Kam ethnic identity, more so, in the context of the massive socio-economic changes occurring in ethnic minority communities in China.

An Ethnography of Identities

The term ethnic identity describes an attachment to uniqueness so as to belong to a certain ethnic or cultural group. It is the cognitive construct that they themselves and others see as being associated with this ethnic group, through their feelings, beliefs, sociocultural customs, and behaviours. As such, ethnic identity is mutually constructed, negotiated, and represented, by both ingroup and outgroup communities. Previous research on ethnic identity through the analysis of the interview narrative has largely followed two research paradigms: Labov and Waletzky's (1967/1997) foundational work on narrative analysis produced a framework which has pervasively influenced narrative studies. Through this framework, the analyst describes narratives of personal experience by eliciting their structural and evaluative properties. In their framework, Labov and Waletzky defined a narrative by the presence of its narrative components, the temporal ordering of these components, and the evaluation of these components as a mechanism by which the audience interprets and is hence guided by the story. This framework, however, triggered a great deal of dissent among scholars working within conversation analysis (CA) or ethnomethodology. Conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists (e.g., Schegloff, 1997; Goodwin, 1997; Ochs and Capps, 2001) argued that Labov and Waletzky's model neglected the role of the storytelling activity in its original context. Focusing on both verbal and non-verbal conduct, conversation analysts sought to examine situated social interactions, that is, narratives as talk-in-interaction, and thus naturally occurring data (see Roulston, 2006 for a review).

While the narrative is regarded as a privileged window on human experience, Hymes (1996) insists that the narrative is a universal function of language. Moving beyond the structural properties of teller-led and often monological narratives in Labov and Waletzky's framework, several scholars (De Fina 2006, 2009; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008; De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006) further developed this framework, and thus advocated a social interactional approach as a way of observing the intersubjectivity and junctures of narratives and story-telling contexts, that is, the ways in which narratives shape and are

shaped by the contexts in which they are embedded. This social interactional approach frames interview narratives as an interaction, and therefore describes the interview as shaping and being shaped by the narrative event. Furthermore, the social interactional approach not only considers the here-and-now of the narrative interactions advocated by CA, but also finds junctures across the micro and the macro-levels of social action and relationships (De Fina, 2003, 2006, 2009). In Fludernik's words, a narrative constitutes a "representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium" (2009: 6).

Through documenting narratives in interviews, several studies have analysed the representation and negotiation of ethnic identity, in a range of sociocultural contexts (e.g., Hill 2013; Kalia and Weatherall 2009; Min and Chung 2014; Waerniers 2017). For instance, Di Leonardo (2018) focuses on Italian American families of various economic statuses in Northern California. While combining the methods of participant-observation, the analysis of the narrative account, and economic-historical research, Di Leonardo provides a fresh interpretation of ethnic identity as both materially grounded and individually negotiated, examining the influence of occupational experiences on individuals to select either family or community as the unit of collective ethnic identity. This study draws on components of linguistic ethnography, thus providing an effective reference for the current study. Linguistic ethnography (Blommaert 2005; Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2015) emphasises the importance of ethnography during linguistic analysis in providing a discursive space and a site of encounter (Rampton 2007a, 2007b; Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2015). Gyberg et al. (2018) develop a narrative approach to investigate the ethnicity-related experiences of young people in Sweden and examine whether these types of experiences differ when predicated on factors such as immigrant status, self- or other-identified ethnicity, and age-group. Their thematic analysis of the interview narratives exposes similar themes, thus suggesting an undercurrent of complex and multicultural identities as significant in the formation of young people's identities.

However, empirically grounded studies that draw on such interview narratives, to examine ethnic identity in the Chinese context are rare. Some such studies include Irgengioro (2018), Li, Lan, and He (2019), and Wu (2019), though these previous studies focused on theme retrieval rather than seeking discursive or interactional activity. As such, these studies focused on the narrative as a source for describing participant realities, rather than considering the narratives as contextually bound phenomena specific to the linguistic and social communities of the participants. For instance, Li et al. (2019) employs an ethnographic approach to examine differences in the identification processes through the narratives of three Malimasa communities in Yunnan province, Southwest China.

The Kam people, as an ethnic group in Southern China, are globally known for their grand choirs, i.e., their polyphonic choir singing listed in 2009 by UNESCO as world-class intangible

cultural heritage. Though residing in mountainous regions and practising farming for subsistence and survival, the Kam people have a public profile in Chinese media higher than that of other ethnic groups. However, despite their high profile in media and performance, and their unique architectural styles and cultural practices, the Kam ethnicity blend into Chinese society as they share physical characteristics and frequently speak the same language as the Han majority group. These contrastive identities encourage conceptions of this ethnicity as a mysterious ethnic group.

Methodical Framework

To explore the ways in which the Kam people represent and negotiate their ethnic identity in contemporary China, I draw on a linguistic ethnography, and examine the narratives embedded in interviews with the Kam villagers. The narratives of the Kam communities build our understandings of the ways in which their education, mobility experience, perceived and actual distance from home, and work experience impact on the identification and representation of their ethnic identities. In addition, such an exploration would illuminate the dynamic social processes and practices of the Kam people's representation and negotiation of their ethnic identity against the backdrop of rapid socioeconomic developments in the Kam community within a larger China.

I began planning this ethnography in 2015, at which time I began collaborating with colleagues at Southwest University in China. From this institution, I hired three postgraduate students as research assistants (RAs) who were of minority ethnicities in Southwest China, and one of whom had fluency in the local Kam language. The three RAs majored in ethnic studies at the university. My own entry into the context was largely motivated by my work as a scholar in sociolinguistics and identity studies, initially in my original residence in Guizhou Province, China.

The decision to select Zhanli Village as an optimum ethnographic site for exploration arose from several factors: The ethnic minority village is deeply located in a mountainous region that lacks public transport access from the outside, and as such, this remoteness assists in the preservation of traditional Kam customs and culture in comparison with many other ethnic minority villages throughout China. This village has received substantial policy support and government financial investment and has established a long-term collaboration with Southwest University in China, where the university has listed the village as its empirical site for ethnic research.

The three RAs and I visited the Zhanli village seven times between 2016-2019, yet intermittently, with an accumulated total of more than six months. During this period, we interacted with more than 100 villagers on many occasions inside and outside of the village. On each visit, we stayed in a guesthouse at the entrance to the village and developed a close

relationship with the guesthouse owner (see Wang, Jiang, and He 2019), whose family mediated our contact with an extensive range of villagers, village heads, elders, and government officials, and assisted in our learning of the village social relationships. With the assistance of the owner of the guesthouse, the RAs and I established strong relations with many local villagers who gradually and increasingly volunteered to participate in the ethnographic work. Of these contacts, 34 natives of Zhanli village participated in formal discussions and interviews, yielding a total of 61.5 hours of audio recordings which we transcribed into 1,500 pages of text, to subsequently facilitate a detailed text analysis. We interviewed most of the participants twice, and sometimes three or four times, all in Mandarin Chinese, although some interviewees lacked proficiency in Mandarin, which we considered during the data analysis.

The narratives from our interviews with the Kam villagers provide key insights into the question of the ways in which the villagers' ethnic identities are represented and negotiated in situated and discursive contexts. I consider these narratives to be an essential mode of the villagers' communication, of the oral manifestation of their experience (Ochs and Capps, 1996), and of making sense of their world. As Riessman (1993) argues, people lead 'storied lives,' and these recorded narratives explicate the lived realities of the participants. I supplement this linguistic ethnography by also paying attention to the spatial aspects of the village, i.e., the physical settings and participant positionings, as well as participant interactional histories and projects, participant cultural positionings of self and other, and an array of participant communications.

Such an ethnography thus required that I apply a social interactional approach, with which I sought to document and analyse the interview narratives. Here, participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interactions with these informants, and archival materials, all contributed to the exploration of Kam ethnic identity as a social and cultural construct of self-representation, against a backdrop of integration and attempted assimilation of ethnic minorities into larger Chinese society. While framing participants' narratives as this discursively constructed activity, this study prioritizes the narrative's capacity to assign meaning to human experience during the telling. The study foregrounds the ways in which the participants structure the stories, to render them tellable, i.e., to strengthen their cultural resonance and meaningfulness, and to manage the work involved in storytelling, such as the story's interactional design and situated tellings (De Fina and Georgeakopoulou 2008). Throughout, I hold that language and social life mutually and continually shape one another, and that close analysis of the situated use of language can provide profound insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of the villagers' social and cultural practices.

Description of Findings

In this section, I draw on data from the documented discussions with 34 Kam participants, who, unlike the other 100 or so villagers whom we contacted, expressed great interest in participating. Throughout the ethnography, I increasingly realized that I could separate these members of the village into three groups. I created these three groups (1, 2, 3) consequent to their social and professional dispositions, their mobility across the village borders, and their aspirations for negotiating their local and cosmopolitan identities. Group 1 of the respondents comprised ten participants, as local villagers with relatively lower levels of education, and little or no interaction with the outside world. These participants are all male, aged between 40 and 70 years, and all married with one or two children. While most of these participants have at some point held a leading or senior position in the village, such as village head, village Party secretary, or village primary school teacher, the primary work of this group was still farming in the village. Group 2 comprised 16 individuals with some experience of living outside the village for education or employment, but who finally opted to return to their village community. The group consists of ten male and six female participants, aged between 20 and 40. Here, 12 people were married and four were unmarried at the time of our fieldwork. Seven of the members of this group had received university or college education, while 12 were engaged in non-farming work in the village or close by in the county, such as schoolteachers, office assistants, small business owners, etc. Only four of the participants in this group continued to work as farmers in the village. Group 3 comprised eight individuals, all born in the Kam village but have lived or worked for considerable periods in large cities, while all have received high school education or above. The three female and five male participants in this group were aged between 20 and 40 years of age. Seven of these eight members work in manufacturing or hospitality industries in Beijing, Guangdong, or Zhejiang, and one managed his own business in Zhejiang. Six of the members in this group were married and all had one or two children. This distribution generally represents the experiences of the population of the Kam village as a whole. However, the status of individuals in Groups 2 and 3 may change as, like many migrant workers throughout China, this community has a floating population that travels back and forth between villages and cities.

Group 1: The Local Senior Villagers

This first group of participants comprises a cohort of mostly older villagers who have relatively low levels of education and little interaction with the outside world. Most of these villagers have not as yet ventured away from this remote village. This lack of travel includes the county seat located 25 km away from the village, linked only by a narrow and bumpy country road. During our visits, we observed many such people working in the fields, laundering clothes in the small creek stretching across the village, knitting, or engaged in

other domestic chores inside or immediately outside of their houses, or simply chatting with others in the Drum Towers (Chinese: 鼓楼) or on the Wind and Rain Bridge (Chinese: 风雨桥). Most such villagers were clad in their traditional dark blue ethnic wear and spoke only the Kam language. Given their limited proficiency with Mandarin Chinese and their reticence in talking to strangers from outside of the village, we had few opportunities to engage in in-depth interaction with these villagers, other than exchanging simple greetings or very brief conversations about themselves and their families. We made considerable effort to become acquainted with this whole cohort of villagers, by inviting participation in the interviews. Eventually, we succeeded in interviewing ten senior male villagers from this cohort who form our first group of participants in our study. However, no female village members with a similar background agreed to participating. This refusal is likely attributable to language limitations or simply a reluctance to become involved in our research. Although the participants were afforded freedom to speak and to contribute as they saw best, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, in which the majority lacked strong competence. This lack of language competence may have sometimes confined our discussions.

More so than the other two groups, this group demonstrated a lesser intention to participate, and a greater vigilance in their interactions towards village outsiders. Some participants held prominent positions such as village head or local teacher, and therefore are likely to have over-represented the upper tier of the traditional authority structure, that is, village elders (Chinese: 寨老). Largely motivated by their seniority and prior roles in society, these participants hold a relatively high social status in the Kam community. As repositories of cultural and other knowledge, on which our interactions focused, they appeared highly respectable during our interactions. The social networks of these participants were largely limited to the local villagers in Zhanli, the Miao in Fuzhong (a village immediately neighbouring Zhanli), and Hans (i.e., *kejia* in the Kam language) including ordinary tourists and *kejia* cadres (government officials) sent to work in the village.

We purposely arranged these interviews at the Wind and Rain Bridge, one of the three main public spaces in the Kam village where people gather, and which we often used as the interview site to create a friendly and relaxing atmosphere. The other two are Drum Tower, which invites communal and administrative discussions, and Sa Sui Altar (Chinese: 萨坛) which invites religious events and rituals.

Several factors arose from the narratives of these participants. These include their political trepidation, recognition and identification of their ethnic identity, attitudes toward outsiders, perceptions concerning village development, and miscommunication between the villagers and the local government. While participants in this group share similarities with each other in their political trepidation, a high level of self-recognition and identification of their ethnic identity, and their understanding of miscommunication between the villagers and the local

government, this group of participants differ to each other in their attitudes towards outsiders and their perceptions concerning village development. These factors all work in concert to constitute a unique discursive pattern that emerges from the interview narratives.

The most explicit feature in their narratives is political trepidation. In response to our concerns of ethnic inequality, all participants quickly denied any discrimination in Han-Kam relationships, and thus any suggestions of Kam superiority. In relation to their ethnic classifications and relationships, these participants only discussed the Kam, the Miao (their immediate neighbours), and the Han, as the three ethnic groups with whom they network. References to the Han people (i.e., *kejia* in the Kam language) frequently arose when describing individuals who entered their communities as cadres appointed to the village by the Chinese government (see Extract 1) or as talented businessmen (see Extract 2). However, we observed some hesitancy, evident in the denial of discrimination against other ethnic groups (Extract 1) and in describing the *kejia*'s governance over Miao people rather than themselves as Kam (Extract 2).

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| H: | 那时候只要是干部就派过来，还是一定要派客家的过来？ [At that time, could any cadres be sent over here, or did they have to be <i>kejia</i> cadres?] |
| W: | 派客家的过来！（肯定） [They must send the <i>kejia</i> cadres! (emphasised)] |
| H: | 那时候那些客家的来，他有没有歧视.....就存不存在歧视啊，像看不起这种情况？ [At that time, when the <i>kejia</i> came, did he discriminate against ... was there any discrimination, like looking down on (the local people)?] |
| W: | 也没有。少数民族都有，他不一定是客家！有些几个干部有些也是农村、也是少数民族，侗族啊、苗族啊也有！多的是汉族！ [Not really. There were also minority cadres. They didn't all have to be <i>kejia</i> . Some were also from the countryside, from the minorities, like the Kam and the Miao, but the majority were Han.] |

Extract 1 – Interview 1-2, pp. 23–24, in December 2017

In this extract, the interviewee W denies the possibility of discrimination by the *kejia* cadres against the locals. At first, he agrees that only *kejia* cadres would be sent over to the village. However, he then retracts his previous notion by adding that the cadres did not all have to be *kejia* and could be minority people. Finally, he includes that “the majority were Han.” In response to sensitive questions regarding interethnic discrimination, no participant verbally challenges the authority of the government and always echoes the government's discourse of ethnic equality. These participants, and particularly the ex-village-heads and schoolteachers, express their knowledge of the significance of political trepidation and

correctness. Moreover, these individuals seem to have developed conceptions of inferiority towards the kejia, likely influenced by the longstanding dominance of the Han over minorities such as the Kam. This inferiority complex clearly appears in the following extract.

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| W: | 但是因为那边的也不是我们侗族，那边住的是那边的苗族，住的汉族客家统治他们了嘛！... 一般都是苗族的他不会做生意，客家他是会做生意，他又会有接触外面的朋友多，他会做生意啊！后来他就富裕起来！他基本是跟那些苗家基本是买完啦，都是属于是他的啦！那边的、西部那边主要是受那边客家统治了嘛！我们这一边呢，有人在这属于是苗家，就是我们自己的侗族多，我们比他们思想又先进点，所以我们生活比他们又富裕点！ |
| | [But because it is not our Kam people who live over there, it is the Miao people who live there, and the Han kejia who rule them! Generally, the Miao cannot do business, Kejia can do business. They have contact with outside friends, they do business ah! Then, they get rich! They (i.e., kejia) basically bought it all from the Miao families, and it all belonged to them! Over there, the western side is mainly ruled by the kejia! On our side, there are people who belong to the Miao families here, that is, we have some Miao people here, we are more advanced than the Miao, so we are richer than them! |

Extract 2 Interview 3-1, pp.18-19, December 2017

In Extract 2 (above), the Kam informant describes Kam conceptions of the hierarchy between the Han, the Miao and the Kam. The interviewee W's description of these 'ruling' and 'governing' relations between the Han (kejia) and the Miao, while locating the Miao as distant and separated from the Kam ('over there', 'the western side') demonstrates W's political trepidation. Through this trepidation, the W asserts that there is a separated body, in a separate location, and communally and ethnically separate, that is in a separate political position. As such, W constructs a discourse of separation, so as to intensify the deference to the Han's extended dominant position over the ethnic minorities, and in particular, the Kam. Significantly, when discussing things "on our side," W foregrounds Kam's better position over the Miao, a stance which may result from the attempt to reinforce the Kam's ethnic dignity, through their efforts to place themselves at some middle point in hierarchical relations between the Han, the Kam, and the Miao.

During the interviews, many Kam villagers frequently addressed themselves, and particularly as "we Kam people" (我们侗族) or "we minorities" (我们少数民族), demonstrating a high level of self-recognition and identification as members of the Kam ethnicity. These participants displayed certainty with regards to their Kam ethnic identity, with a stronger conviction of adherence to their ethnic traditions than those in the other two groups. From their perspective, this ethnic identification may be key to obtaining government support and to promoting tourism, which would increase the amount of resource injected into

their community to sustain their livelihoods, and more so than resorting to traditional farming.

In their narratives, the respondents categorised outsiders into two broad groups; developers, as state officials and businesspeople, and visitors, including tourists, researchers, and seekers of the mysterious ‘change flower herb’ (换花草, Chinese) that in legend has the power to alter the sex of the foetus during pregnancy. Although they expressed a range of attitudes towards these two categories of outsiders, they generally welcomed tourists more widely than developers. This preference is possibly attributable to the fact that tourists bring immediate financial benefits, while the presence of developers has more complex and potentially negative implications. For instance, developers might in some way associate themselves with the government, either as government agents or as government-backed businesspeople. Such a segregation of attitudes between these two categories signifies a disdain of sorts toward the government practices. The following extract illustrates this, that is, their complex set of attitudes towards government practices.

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| H: | 就是他们来做这个传统村落，他需不需要经过你们允许啊？ |
| | [They came to ‘create’ the traditional village, do they need to get your permission?] |
| W: | 我们也没得办法哦.....村里面没得办法哦！没得这个权利哦！只有乡、县里面的旅游局来管的。他给你搞你才搞！像搞房子都要经过旅游局风景处！ |
| | [There’s no way for us ... There's no way for the village! [We have] no right to do this! But the tourism bureaux in the township and the county are in charge. If they allow you to do it, then you can do it! Like when (we) renovate the houses we had to go through the landscape office of the tourism bureau!] |
| H: | 村民呢？你们的意见呢？ |
| | [What about the villagers? What about your opinions?] |
| W: | 我们的意见呢.....那倒是好搞哦！我们的意见好搞哦！随便哪个来搞那都可以村里面来批准，在风景处问就没给噶！哪个地方破坏风景啊，那都没给搞了！ |
| | [Our opinions... that’s easy! Our opinion is easy to manage! No matter who came, the village would approve. The landscape office is not that easy! If any (project) damages the landscape, it wouldn’t be approved!] |
| W: | 没晓得嘛！他国人有他的那种说法！你没晓得他里面是搞什么鬼东西！没晓得嘛！ |
| | [No idea! Those people have their own sayings! You wouldn’t know what the hell is going on there! You don’t know!] |

Extract 3 – Interview 1-2, p. 13, in December 2017

In the above extract, the W announces their distrust of developers external to the Kam community, and their complaints toward the opaqueness of the government's initiative of rebuilding the traditional villages. As such, the villagers perceive the development projects as somewhat ambiguous. These concerns also suggest the villagers' deep-rooted diffidence with those outside of the village, as they condemn the aggressive or destructive actions of outsiders. Concurrently, they express the helplessness of the villagers, and the village, as a small ethnic community with no power or control over its own development. Aligning with Goffman's (1974) notion of muffing, the villagers seem to engage in, or at least agree to, mitigating their control over their own communal achievements, assigning agency to the landscape office for developments in the village.

Despite the extensive positive feedback on the government's initiatives to revitalize the community's cultural climate, and hence the intentions by the villagers to maintain strong collaborative channels of communication, the interviews, including Extract 3 above, exposed miscommunication between the villagers and the government. For instance, the villagers regarded their traditional wooden houses as old-fashioned and associated these with poverty and admired those who lived in brick houses. The government, however, considers wooden houses an essential symbol of Kam cultural lineage, and condones the preservation of these houses in the name of tourism development. Accordingly, in the Kam 'Traditional Village' rebuilding project, the local government strictly prohibits the construction of brick houses. This conceptual difference exposes the village's symbolic structure. The villagers welcome and enjoy and signs of modernity in the village through which to demolish obsolete Kam styled buildings and rituals. In opposition to this, government agents and the government-backed companies draw on the traditional architectures and rituals as resources for tourism development. This difference in ideology thus creates the potential for conflict between the villagers and the local government. Extract 3 also demonstrates that the government has not as yet involved local villagers in the planning of their own village. The villagers have thus become passive recipients of the government's good will, having little if any agency in decision making. Evidently, these government-initiated projects mainly adopt a government-centred approach to the social and economic development of ethnic villages and the maintenance of ethnic culture.

Group 2: Educated People Returning to the Village

The villagers in this group, with long-term experience of external mobility, were mostly in their 20s and 30s, with several in their 40s. Most had attended high school or college and had some work or study experience in large cities. The individuals in this group have a more extensive educational history than those in Group 1 and had greater knowledge of the outside world. Their attitudes towards their ethnic identity appeared more pragmatic than those in

Group 1, choosing when and how to effectively highlight or play down their ethnic identity. Most are fluent in Mandarin and had strong comprehension of the interview discourse.

Like many other young members of the Kam community, particularly those who have not entered college or university, some members of this group had chosen to join Kam Grand Choirs or troupes of Kam dancers in Beijing, Guangzhou, Guiyang, and Guilin, the four most popular destinations for the village's young outbound migrant workers. For these individuals, performing in a Kam Grand Choir presents an important pathway to urban life, yet insufficient for sustaining their urban livelihood, and hence, these individuals take on additional work in the manufacturing or hospitality industries. Following a several year tenure in large cities, these participants returned to the Kam village, now having the capital to invest in businesses, a house, and to start a family, as the normative trajectory of many young people from the village.

Through our fieldwork and analytical work, we identified several factors that discursively distinguish this group from the other two, such as early awareness of their ethnic identity, familiarity with the outsiders' interests, attitudes towards traditional Kam culture, a better awareness of the village's status, and patent support of government initiatives.

The mobility experiences of this group have strengthened their achieving an awareness of their ethnic identity earlier than their local peers. Early on in their mobility, many experienced significant hardship when communicating with other communities in Mandarin Chinese. They reported that this inadequacy made them feel "stupid like pigs" or "so incapable," particularly at times when they observed other ethnic minorities speaking Mandarin with a higher level of competence. Although they eventually adequately strengthened their Mandarin, this initial awareness of their language impediment and cultural differences marked them apart from others and motivated their reluctance to speak of their Kam ethnic identity. Most of the individuals in this group succeeded in developing the language and life skills needed to participate in the outside world and found employment in the manufacturing or hospitality industries.

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| X: | 那当时第二个厂的时候其他的汉族或是其他人对少数民族也是什么看法？还是..... |
| | [when you went to the second factory, what is the Han and other people's opinion towards the ethnic minorities? Or...] |
| W: | 但是我们这边会说普通话他们也不知道我们是少数民族。 |
| | [But we can speak Mandarin here and they don't know we're a minority.] |
| W: | 就算知道也不会.....也不会说什么什么。 |
| | [They wouldn't say anything even if they knew it.] |

Extract 4 – Interview 16-1, p.18, in February 2018

Extract 4 shows that young people from the Kam village could develop an earlier awareness of having an ethnic identity that distinguished them from other ethnic minorities, as well as from the majority Han population. After leaving the village for work in coastal areas, W expressed excitement in realizing that “we can speak Mandarin here and they don't know we're a minority,” at such a time as when the Kam community develop competence in Standard Chinese in order to survive in a Han-dominant society. W also finds comfort in being accepted when “they (outsiders) wouldn't say anything even if they knew it (we are minorities).”

In comparison with the participants in Group 1, this group appears to display a greater familiarity with outsiders' interests and the official discourse that promotes Zhanli as a tourist attraction. In our interactions, the Group 2 participants employed expressions common in official discourses promoting tourism in Zhanli, such as “我们这边每家只有一儿，一女。 [Every family on our side just has a son and a daughter], ” “如果子女一多，耕地就不够了。 [If you have more (than two children), there would not be enough farming land].” Their expressions, such as “more children will lead to insufficient farming land,” very much align with the propaganda of the government one-child family planning policy (Pletcher, 2022), thus demonstrating the participants' familiarity with government discourse and outsiders' interest in the Kam community.

The attitudes of this group towards elements of traditional Kam culture differed from the senior villagers in the first group. Rather than learning to sing in Kam Grand Choirs as is the Kam ethnic tradition, they generally did so to develop the skills that would later assist in their survival in urban centres. This aspiration led most young villagers, particularly girls, to develop their competence in choir singing from adult teachers at a very early age. We observed that the girls were keener to learn to sing than the boys, a fact that the villagers attributed to the boys' laziness or to their prospects in other work in urban centres. Unlike the seniors, who wore ethnic costumes daily, this group generally wore urban modern attire, as does contemporary Han society, yet using ethnic attire for special rituals and occasions, such as weddings and traditional festivals. Many of the members of this group have not had the opportunity to learn traditional Kam dress making, owing to the art's irrelevance to their urban aspirations, and thus opting for ready-made clothing. Against a backdrop of wooden vs. brick house controversy, we observed that some members of this group had built a concrete structure inside a wooden exterior in order to avoid violating the government directive of forbidding brick houses. In addition, unlike their village peers, many report that they prefer watching TV or media on mobile phones rather than traditional bullfights in the village. In February 2018, we interviewed a young couple who, with many years of external mobility experience, settled in the village. The couple discuss their attitudes towards traditional bullfights frequently seen in the Kam community.

| | |
|----|---|
| H: | 哦，那你喜不喜欢看斗牛啊？ |
| | [oh, do you like to watch the bullfight?] |
| W: | 斗牛？斗牛这种我也不怎么喜欢。 |
| | [bullfight? I don't like bullfight.] |
| H: | 那你们那个买牛你们家凑钱吗？呵呵..... |
| | [then, do you also chip in to buy the bull? Haha...] |
| W: | 那必须的！ |
| | [definitely so!] |
| | ... |
| W: | 斗牛.....斗牛.....搞那个斗牛亏得很啦！ |
| | [bullfight...bullfight... It's a huge loss to engage in that bullfight.] |
| X: | 对呀，那你们还那么乐意，还很热衷啊！ |
| | [Yes, but you are still so happy and enthusiastic.] |
| W: | 没办法啊！老人家都喜欢啦！呵呵呵.....老人家喜欢没办法。 |
| | [(we) have no way to do without it! The old people love it! Ha ha ha ... the old people like it but we have no way to do without it.] |

Extract 5 – Interview 23-1, pp.62-63, in February 2018

The above extract exposes W's obedience to the ethnic tradition of bullfighting. While he clearly expresses his dislike of bullfighting, as it is "a huge loss to engage in the bullfight," he also indicates that "we have no way to do without it" as the "old people love it." The bullfights in the Kam community, as Balinese cockfights, are not only "money gambling" but also "status gambling" (Geertz, 1973). These fights obtain a high level of popularity and support among the local villagers. Those with rich external mobility experience cannot easily abandon this ethnic practice, despite their expression of disdain toward it.

In response to questions of possible ethnic inequality, nearly all participants in this group expressed the view that all ethnic groups in this region and in Congjiang County were living harmoniously together without any apparent discrimination. The following interviewee, a schoolteacher in the village who has attended college for several years in a big city, discusses recent changes to the village:

| | |
|----|--|
| X: | 那像占里这里是不是还算保持得挺好的，从各方面？ |
| | [Are all aspects in Zhanli still quite well maintained?] |
| L: | 这里来说不能讲保持，是因为这里的，那个，路通得很慢。 |
| | [I can't talk about maintenance here, because here, that, the access to roads is very slow.] |
| X: | 时间太晚了是吧。 |
| | [It's very late (for having a road), isn't it?] |
| L: | 对，所以被汉化的程度就是比较慢，这两年就比较快。 |
| | [Yes, so the degree of Sinicization is relatively slow, and these two years are relatively fast.] |
| L: | 主要是路通路了就出去打工了，路通了就走到外面去，他们的思维想法各方面的就是慢慢的改变了。 |
| | [Mainly when the road was open, they went out to work, and with road access, they went outside, and their thinking and ideas are slowly changing.] |
| L: | 所以它那个，简单说就是落后。 |
| | [So, simply put it, here is backward.] |

Extract 6 – Interview 28-2, p.4-5, in February 2018

This extract suggests that the correspondent L visualizes the current disposition of the village, particularly the changes brought by road access. L interprets the fact that the maintenance of the ethnic culture in Zhanli results from the “slow access to roads” and consequently, “the relatively slow degree of Sinicization.” In addition, he frames Zhanli as a comparatively backward village where people once lived in hardship and held relatively conservative ideals. This awareness, not significantly appearing in Group 1, would be influenced to a much greater degree by the education and external mobility experience of Group 2 participants.

Through our thick discussions, these participants evidenced their support of government initiatives to boost the local economy through tourism development projects, believing that an increase in tourism would correlate positively with income change for the village, as it would with new ideas for the development of the Kam community. Such a contribution would improve the village economy from which they, as a new generation, would unquestionably benefit. As such, the support of this group for tourism development did not so much emanate from their appreciation of or longing for traditional Kam ethnic practices, but more so, due to economic constraints. Yet, the hazy significance of the development projects continues to confuse these villagers, who generally build their support for external investment on the hope that the village experiences social and economic development.

Group 3: Outbounders from the Village

Group 3 of the participants comprises those who chose to live as migrant workers in large cities at a significant distance from the Kam village. Like many other migrant workers in China, the migration patterns of some people in this group were seasonal. During the winter, many chose to return to the village, to celebrate holidays with family or to assist with farm work. As such, discussions were conducted both in person and online, as some were currently living in large urban centres. This group had received education levels that were relatively higher than those in the other groups, and were more competent in Mandarin, facilitating (their interest in) communication with the researchers.

In large urban centres cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai, these participants mainly engaged in two types of work; that closely related to their ethnic identity, such as performing in Kam Grand Choirs, or the manufacturing or service industries. We identified several factors in this group of participants, the most prominent of which appeared to be a polarised commitment to ethnic identity. In general, they relinquish their self-recognition and vision of ethnic identity as they move away from the Kam village, with the exception of those who seek to capitalize on their ethnic identity and hence for monetary gain when performing in Kam Grand Choirs. Those whose work has little relevance with their ethnic tradition tend to downplay or even disguise their ethnic identity. Below we present an excerpt from an interview with a young man who has been employed in a factory in Guangdong for many years:

| | |
|----|---|
| J: | 你们的老板会说你是侗族，会知道你的侗族民族身份吗？ |
| | [does your boss say you are a Kam, or know that your Kam ethnic identity?] |
| W: | 这个我们是进厂之后，他们看身份证有那个..... |
| | [when we joined the factory, they would have seen it on my ID card...] |
| J: | 那看见侗族，他们不会问你们一些问题呢？ |
| | [when they have seen you are a Kam, would they ask you some questions?] |
| W: | 他也不问。那只是我们会交流了就可以，他也不会说问什么问题。 |
| | [they would not. Only if we can communicate him well (in Mandarin), he would not ask any question.] |
| W: | 只要你进入厂后，他会说，只要你进厂登记过，然后他就说干活就是看你这个看你个人的，干活好不好啊什么之类的。 |
| | [Once you joined the factory, they know that you have registered (your ethnic identity). Then, he will see your own ability, whether you can work well (rather than your ethnic identity).] |

Extract 7 – Interview 14-1, p.19, in April 2018

In the extract above, W describes that, in the manufacturing industry, the employers were more concerned with employee capacity as workers rather than their ethnic background, particularly at times when they can effectively communicate. This comment suggests that their ethnic identity recedes in the work environment, and that their professional disposition and affordances superseded ethnic identity.

In contrast, another correspondent in this group, a Kam woman in her late 20s originally from Zhanli, was a well-known member of Kam choirs in Beijing, and worked as a yoga instructor in her urban area. The woman repeatedly featured in public media as a representative of both the Kam Choirs and her ethnic practices. In our interactions, she presented herself as a beautiful fashionable urban woman who continuously attempted to preserve and promote her ethnic identity in order to add lustre to her image. When asked how the Kam Grand Choirs were organised in Beijing, she commented as follows:

| | |
|----|---|
| W: | 那个组织就是有一个.....就是老人嘛！因为我不是说嘛，好多人他们在做.....或者有什么就单位呀就是这种，需要这种就是我们民族文化，然后他们就从老家请那些人来嘛，就来唱歌.....就因为他们就建了一个就是老乡聚会的那种嘛。 |
| | [That organization just has been (organized) by the old men! As I said, a lot of people are doing it... Or if some workplace needs (to have a show of) our ethnic culture, and then they (the old men) invited those people from their hometowns to come and sing. Just because they built a kind of group that is the kind of hometown folks gatherings] |
| W: | 我从小我就喜欢这种，自己本民族的这种文化！我一直都就是.....就是感觉这个态度，就是喜欢民族文化，然后我是很民族的，我肯定会把它传承下去的这种。 |
| | [I've loved our ethnic culture since I was a kid, the culture of my own people! I've always been... It's just feeling this attitude, that is, I like ethnic culture, and then I'm very ethnic, and I will definitely pass it on. |

Extract 8 – Interview 32-1, p.17, in April 2018.

W expresses her eagerness to promote Kam culture and ethnic identity, emphasizing the fact that she aspires to pursue music and song, not least through Kam cultural promotion beyond her hometown. In her view, she must foreground ethnic identity in her role as a key member of the Kam Grand Choirs in Beijing. This intention positions ethnic identity as still an important social and economic resource to sustain livelihood.

The members of this group also discursively attested to the fact that they seek solidarity in their Kam communities whilst living in urban centres, such as the woman in Extract 8 above, who commented that her community “built a kind of group that is the kind of hometown folks gatherings.” We interviewed another female participant in her early 40s, who has had a long and diverse history of mobility, currently works in a factory in Dongguan, Guangdong

Province. In her early 20s, she had sung in Kam Grand Choirs in Hunan Province, and subsequently worked in factories in Zhejiang and Guangdong. We interviewed the woman upon her return to the village for the Chinese New Year in 2018.

| | |
|----|---|
| W: | 我去打工的话半年就回来，上半年去下半年就回家。 |
| | [I went out to work for half a year and stayed home for half. If (I spent) the first half outside, (I spent) second half at home then.] |
| H: | 那你们现在就是一般出去打工都是一个村的带出去的？ |
| | [So now you usually go out to work with people from the same village?] |
| W: | 嗯，一个村进一个厂了，哈哈.....如果租房租一栋楼，呵呵。 |
| | [Yeh, the same village went into the same factory, haha... If you rented, you rented in the same building, ha ha.] |
| H: | 你们就租房？ |
| | [Then, you rented a place yourselves] |
| W: | 嗯 |
| | [Yeh.].... |

Extract 9 – Interview 18-1, pp. 4–7, in February 2018

This extract describes the experiences of other outbounders from the village who sought and obtained employment in big cities. Many of the outbounders chose to float between city and village, spending six months away from the village and six months in farm work or simply enjoying time with their family at the Kam village. During their working in cities, these participants met frequently and even co-resided at times as owing to their common ethnic origins. Their experiences of departing from their home village to work and eventually settle in a large city have optimized their life trajectories. In a factory environment with a diverse community of people from throughout China, these Kam villagers likely subordinate the maintenance of their ethnic identity to the urban need for survival, that is, they conceal their ethnic identity in order to assimilate into urban life.

Regarding language use, dress, hair styles, and even gestures, this group was scarcely distinguishable from modern urban dwellers. In our interactions, we found it somewhat arduous to articulate the appearances and accents between this group and other urban residents. For example, the participants in Extract 8 and Extract 9, as women working in big cities, both wore modern attire that exactly matches that worn by others in their urban centres.

The observations and interactions with this group suggest the fact that most of these interactants rarely consider or discuss their Kam ethnic identity. Particularly for those who

seek to enter mainstream society outside their own community, their ethnic identity more so hinders than facilitates their integration. In addition, this group has patently refrained from discussing government practices in the village and the villagers' attitudes towards these practices, a propensity possibly attributable to the fact that their outbound mobility has rendered such symbolisms as meaningless, or otherwise, to their trepidation when discussing politically sensitive and controversial issues.

Discussion

The extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Zhanli village targeted narratives addressing ethnic identity. The speakers constructed these narratives during the discussions between themselves and the researchers. Our daily interactions and interviews with the three groups of villagers did generate rich data, which elaborated significantly on the diversity of perceptions of social connections with ethnic groups outside of the Kam community, as well as their ways of representing their ethnic identity. The key features in their narratives include the fact that the correspondents negotiate their stance through these narratives. This phenomenon emerges and becomes apparent when considering the narrative as an interactional social practice that accounts for both micro and macro-levels of social actions and relationships (De Fina, 2003, 2006, 2009).

On account of their limited interaction with outsiders, most Group 1 villagers had only reported on their encounters with three ethnic groups (the Han, the Miao, and the Kam). The participants in this group displayed complex attitudes towards the Han population, particularly during their interaction with the kejia cadres. However, the ethnic Kam are required to show respect to the kejia cadres who assume an administrative role in the village. Again, in opposition to this, the local Kam clearly perceive the kejia cadres as ethnic outsiders, creating a tension. To mitigate such interethnic tensions, the government has sent some local ethnic minority cadres to the village to serve alongside the kejia cadres.

The narratives in Extract 1 evidence the changing tone and circumventive attitudes towards kejia. At the onset of the excerpt, the correspondent confirms that only kejia cadres can be sent to the village. However, in response to the question of possible discrimination against the locals, he changes his tone and opinion, noting that the cadres are not necessarily all kejia and can also be ethnic minorities. In Extract 2, the correspondent describes the ruling relations between the Miao and Han, who live far from the Kam. The correspondent avoids discussing the historic ruling of the Han over the Kam, but praises the kejia (i.e., the Han) as smart businesspeople who seize the land from the Miao, thus framing the Miao as poorer than the Kam. This changing tone and circumventive attitude towards the Han may stem from the Kam's political trepidation in avoiding confrontation with the Han and demonstrates their acumen when negotiating their ethnic identity during interethnic tensions.

Differences in Kam people's perceptions of and attitudes toward their ethnic identity also become evident in their accounts of the government's attempts to reinvent ethnic culture. To encourage the economic and cultural development of ethnic minorities and their residential areas, the government has planned and has directed various strategies that utilise natural and cultural resources in these areas, which the Kam people acknowledge. However, while our findings reveal most participants' overall support for the government's practices among, the local villagers express widespread scepticism towards the developers responsible for the implementation of government-initiated projects in the village. Their complaints focus on the lack of transparency in decision-making in these projects, including the well-known rebuilding "Traditional Villages" campaign. In particular, the villagers express widespread disapproval towards the government's mandate for the preservation of wooden houses in Zhanli. These complaints and widespread disapproval emerge in the correspondents' hesitation and frequent changes in speeches. For example, in Extract 3 (above), the correspondent suggests that; "Who would have asked our permission? We didn't dare to say that ...", "There's no way for us ... There's no way for the village! [We have] no right to do this!" Conceptions of interethnic inequality and tension may strongly influence these shifts in speech during the narratives.

Our research also demonstrated the existence of significant inter- and intra-group differences in attitudes towards their ethnic identity among these three groups of villagers. The extent to which each of these three groups recognised their ethnic identity appears to vary according to their distance from their place of origin. Those who had live in the village throughout the whole of their lives likely maintain a high level of identification with their ethnic group and adhere to their ethnic codes in relation to language use, clothing style, and respect for ethnic culture and values. By contrast, Kam individuals who choose to live away from their community tend to underplay their ethnic identity with intention to integrate or assimilate into the dominant Han culture, language, clothing, and urban lifestyle. As such, most participants in Groups 2 and 3, appear to reserve ethnic identity and its associated codes of practice for special ceremonial occasions and/or for commercial purposes. Some participants with extensive experience with external mobility consciously foregrounded their ethnic identity by dressing in ethnic attire in public spaces to exploit their ethnicity for commercial purposes. This practice differs significantly from that of their compatriots, in that it demonstrates not only a self-identification as an ethnic Kam but, more importantly, a deployment of this ethnic identity to obtain social and economic benefits.

Despite the above variation, clear intra-group differences also emerge among participants in Groups 2 and 3, as these participants had varying experiences of external mobility. The perceptions and attitudes of correspondents in these groups towards ethnic identity and culture were largely influenced by their individual experiences. Despite displaying a high level of identification with their ethnic identity in diverse sociocultural contexts, the Kam people

who successfully integrate or assimilate into mainstream society tend to downplay their ethnic identity in their social goings on. For the Kam with other established professional or social identities, such as engineers, scientists, or teachers, their ethnic identity serves no immediate practical purpose, in contrast to those who become compelled to use the Kam identity for benefits it may bestow. For example, those who perform in Kam Grand Choirs in cities exploit their ethnic identity and its codes as an important symbolic, socio-political, and economic resource for achieving their goals. This pragmatic and utilitarian approach to ethnic identity has become increasingly conspicuous among the Kam in contemporary urban China.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates a linear relinquishing of Kam ethnic identity along with distance from the home village of the Kam people. While those people in Group 1 who have lived in their home village throughout life have retained a strong sense of identification with ethnic identity, participants in Group 2 who have external mobility experience, and those in Group 3 who chose to live in big cities, have increasingly downplayed their Kam ethnic identity, with an intention to assimilate and integrate into Han-dominated communities. The only exception is that those who still exploit their ethnic identity for their own benefit at times hide, downplay, or foreground their ethnic identity. For many Kam people in current Southwest China, ethnic identity has, to a large extent, been transformed into a ceremonial or even commercialised label that can be exploited by numerous individuals for their own interests. Consequently, ethnic identity in contemporary China has been distanced from its original bucolic form and is subject to negotiation, contestation, and remaking. Given the current mass movement of people from different ethnic groups, both urban and rural China have become sites for representation and negotiation of ethnicity in which people from different ethnic backgrounds compete for employment, living space, and social development. Under these conditions, the de-minoritisation and assimilation of ethnic minorities into the majority Han culture seems inevitable.

Framing the narrative as a situated social practice that involves constant self-representation and negotiation, this study has employed a social interactional approach to explore Kam ethnic identity. The local villagers have embedded and have constructed their ethnic identities in their narratives. As Blommaert (2005) notes, people produce, enact, or perform identities, while the context, space, and place, and the purpose of communication, also shape identity construction. This anti-essentialist view of identity and the social interactional approach to the analysis of identity embeds ethnic identity reconstruction into its sociocultural context, and uncovers practices and processes of ethnic identity reconstruction in the Kam community in Southwest China against a backdrop of accelerating process of integration and assimilation of ethnic minorities in China.

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