CHAPTER THREE

THE NAME ‘KAM’

\[\text{Jil naemx xenh mem; xodt sungp semh dens.}\]

To drink, you need a well; to speak, you need a reason for what you say.

The name ‘Kam’ used by the people of Xiangye to define their nationality was, according to them, a name handed down by their ancestors. They did not know what it meant.\(^1\)

Han people of the area called their own children ‘zai’, the Chinese term for ‘sons’. In addition, as a term of affection within the family, they addressed all people in their extended family of a younger generation—including nephews and nieces, and grandsons and granddaughters—as sons. The term carries the sense of ‘dear ones’ and does not harbour any derogatory or negative meaning. Xiangye people adopted this custom and used it as a means of referring to themselves and other nationalities.

When conversing with people from outside Xiangye, including those of other nationalities, most Xiangye residents referred to themselves as ‘lagx Gaeml’, meaning ‘children of Kam people’. This form of self-appellation expressed modesty and courtesy, and no one despised the Kam people for using it. On the contrary, it seemed as though using it actually helped to bridge barriers between the Kam and other nationalities.

Based on this understanding, Xiangye people referred to their Han and Miao neighbours in similar ways. They referred to the Han people as ‘Gax’, borrowed from the Chinese term Kejia.\(^2\) Another form of

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\(^1\) For a couple of hypotheses, see Geary et al. (2003), p. 3.

\(^2\) Kejia people are known in English as ‘Hakka’. They are people of the ethnic Han background who migrated from the Yellow River basin to south China during the early 4th century, the late 9th century and the early 13th century. Their descendants are found mainly in Guangdong, Fujian, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Hunan and Taiwan. Note that Clarke (1911, p. 9) refers to the ‘Keh-Chia’ (or Kejia) simply as ‘Immigrants’. The Han people who lived in Langdong or in other towns near Xiangye spoke Chinese with a typical Guizhou accent. There seem to be no written records of research into the origin of the Langdong Han people, though they almost certainly arrived after the
A Han person talking to a Kam person in the street.